BECOMING CONGRUENT:
EXPERIENCES OF COUNSELLORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR AUTHENTIC
SELVES

by

Kira L. Bachand

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Abstract

Understanding how counsellors authentically integrate their personal and professional selves into a congruent identity is still in progress. The current study employed an exploratory research methodology to answer the question, what are the experiences of counsellors in understanding and developing their authentic selves in the therapeutic relationship? Six master's level participants were recruited and engaged in semi-structured interviews. Using reflexive thematic analysis to analyze the data, four themes were generated, each containing subthemes. The four themes included: dissolving fear, which described the outset of the participants' journeys as counsellors and the returning point for new challenges; surrendering to self, which involved the recognition and trust of innate abilities and knowing; cultivating capacity, which highlighted the advancement of personal awareness and the ability to hold therapeutic space; and aligning with authenticity, which detailed the subjective accounts of the counsellors as their congruent selves. Findings from the present study contribute to the growing body of research that explores how a congruent use of Self benefits the counsellor, client, and therapeutic relationship. Recommendations for counsellors include incorporating personal and professional practices that help refine their inner attunement ability and to continue expanding their awareness of their authentic selves to determine how they want to engage in the therapeutic relationship.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In the practice of counselling or psychotherapy, congruence, or authenticity, occurs when both the therapist and client are "accessible, approachable, and sincere" and engage in the relationship without the need for "protective façades" (Kolden, et al., 2018, p. 425). Research shows that the relationship between congruence and positive therapy outcomes is significant and supports the continued notion that congruence plays a vital role in the psychotherapy relationship and the wellbeing of both therapist and client (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Rogers, 1957). There is room to expand our understanding of the construct of authenticity and authentic identity development in the counselling literature and doing so will lead to a greater understanding of the therapeutic relationship and the means by which therapeutic change takes place (Klein, et al., 2001; Mayton, 2018). The literature often uses the term authenticity interchangeably with congruence, and so for the purpose of this research, the two terms will be used synonymously.

Reconciling one's personal attributes with their professional training is therefore a crucial milestone towards developing a congruent professional identity as a counsellor (Nugent & Jones, 2009). Coming to the profession already equipped with lived experiences that have informed their sense of Self, the evolution of a counsellor's identity must explore patterns of self-evaluation, self-worth, and self-protection in order to allow their truest Self to be known to themselves and later utilized in the therapeutic relationship. As such, the identity formation of a counsellor has the potential to be greatly influenced by their education and those involved in it, such as peers, supervisors, and clients. To this extent, counsellor identity formation is both an intrapersonal and interpersonal experience (Gibson et al., 2010).

Significance of the Research

The contents of over 400 theories of counselling and psychotherapy differ, but what remains equal are the processes by which therapeutic change takes place (Prochaska & Norcross, 2007). Among these theories, the therapeutic relationship is a process that has been broadly studied and there is support to demonstrate its significance regarding client change (Koole & Tschacher, 2016). More specifically, it is the authentic nature of the counsellor in the relationship that vitally effects therapeutic transformation (Prochaska & Norcross, 2007). What does it therefore mean to be an authentic counsellor, that is, what does it look, feel, and sound like and how would one even know if they were being authentic? The necessary skills of a counsellor can be taught and learned, thus arming counsellors with a full complement of tools and techniques to call upon in the moment; however, research in the field of counselling and psychotherapy has been slowly turning the focus on its own practitioners and demonstrating that it is not the tools and techniques that are regarded as the mechanism for change in therapy, but rather it is the therapeutic relationship between counsellor and client that provides the necessary components for healing (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). More specifically, it can be said that it is the therapist's use of Self that is the fundamental aspect responsible for setting the necessary foundation for personal connection. So, how does one come to understand, strengthen, and utilize the most important aspect of therapy, their authentic Self?

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

I am interested in both the descriptive and interpretive processes of counsellors as they have come to know and develop their authentic selves (Elliot & Timulak, 2005). This includes asking exploratory questions that elicit how one's authentic nature has come to be known, what is its experiential nature, and perhaps when and where do counsellors allow themselves to be

authentically known by another in a professional setting. Additionally, I am interested in how counsellors experience their authentic nature changing over time as their professional identity develops and what conditions promote further exploration and discovery. The research question behind this exploration is thus: What are the experiences of counsellors in understanding and developing their authentic selves in the therapeutic relationship?

Researcher Context (Personal Location)

Allowing my own authentic Self to emerge has been a challenging process. I have been working through my own process of self-discovery for decades and am just now coming to a place where I feel more confident and accepting of myself. This journey has exposed a mix of sorrowful and joyful emotions, and it has been exhausting flipping back and forth, yet I am allowing the process to unfold with the help of supervisors and colleagues (and family/friends). It takes courage for me to bring my whole Self to the forefront, I have closed so much of myself off from others as it has not been safe for me to show up, not accepting. To be invited to show up, for all of me, even the dark parts to be brought in to the light has been a freeing experience. This has been important work for me personally, and now informs my work as a professional. It has taught me to be more accepting of my experience, of whatever stage of learning I am in, and to be able to transmute that same compassion to clients and peers is a gift. I am learning to slow down and feel my inner experience and authentic knowing, and to trust that I am made of exactly what is needed to be present and help others learn to be with themselves in their way.

Conceptual Lens (Theoretical Orientation)

Currently, I conceptually feel placed in the footsteps of the humanistic philosophy that views people as active participants in creating their own reality and able to self-actualize. I also feel inclined towards the existential nature that states there is no set point to which an individual

is working towards, but that one is ever-evolving, ever-becoming in relation to themselves and their world (Rogers, 1980). I have come to recognize that in discovering more of myself through an accepting and curious lens I can come to know another much in the same way. Rogers (1961) identifies this as a critical learning for counsellors, as the depths of their personal discovery will inform the depth of their work in the therapeutic space.

        I am someone that believes in the universality of phenomena, such as in the laws of the universe and the human condition (i.e., to be seen, heard, loved and connected), but I also recognize the social constructivist view that reality is co-created and thus people are capable of making their own meanings out of possible universal experiences. I, as the researcher, can never completely know the fullest depth of meaning that someone holds, as it is the very journey of self-discovery and becoming that they themselves are still on. At best, I can take the social constructivist approach as the researcher and work to co-create, understand, and articulate the ways in which the participants have come to understand their authentic identity. As Ponterotto (2005) states, "[t]he researcher and her or his participants jointly create (co-construct) findings from their interactive dialogue and interpretation" (p. 129), and notes this as being a distinguishing characteristic of constructivism. Boyland (2019) perfectly highlights that it is "Being-there, concernfully present with Other – be that another individual person, multiple other persons, or the unconscious states of Self" (p. 33). In being there together, I and my participants will work collectively in the process of data gathering and analysis with the aim of conveying how people come to know and use their authentic self-knowledge in the therapeutic setting. This collective meaning making and creation of knowledge will contribute to a greater understanding of counsellor identity development and what it means to be authentic in the presence of another.

Overview of the Thesis

This chapter outlines my reasoning as the researcher in arriving at this place of inquiry and why conducting such a study will qualitatively contribute to the known body of literature about authentic counsellor identity. Chapter two examines the existing literature surrounding the topics of counsellor identity development, both personal and professional, and refines the construct of authenticity for the scope of this research and how it is being discussed within the counselling arena. Chapter three outlines the qualitative research methodology that has been employed to gather and analyze participant data and also explains the measures taken to ensure that ethical standards have been met. Research findings from participant interviews are woven into a narrative account and presented in chapter four according to the generated themes and subthemes. Chapter five discusses the research findings and positions them within the existing body of literature. Limitations of the research are also discussed in the fifth and final chapter, which then concludes with implications for practice, areas for future research, and my final remarks as the researcher.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Carl Rogers hypothesized that therapist congruence was one of the vital conditions required for therapeutic change. Congruence, as conceptualized by Rogers, is a state of being within the counsellor or therapist where they can be fully aware of themselves in the moment and utilize this inner experience to strengthen the therapeutic relationship (Rogers, 1957). The construct of congruence, or authenticity as it is also referred to in the counselling literature, is vast and encompasses many aspects of intra and interpersonal functioning; the scope of this research, however, is small and focuses on the relevant topics that pertain to counsellor identity development.

Thus, this chapter focuses on research within the field of counselling and psychotherapy and the topic of counsellor/therapist development and congruence. Given the existential nature of the topic of being congruent or authentic in one's experience, this chapter will briefly touch on the philosophical roots that shaped the psychological understanding of the construct and will then lead to a discussion of counsellor identity development. Moving from personal development and topics of attachment and self-efficacy, this chapter will then discuss professional development and the areas of training and supervision for fostering authenticity within counsellors. The chapter will close with research on congruence and the therapist's use of Self and presence in the therapeutic relationship.

Congruence/Authenticity

Philosophical Background

Much of what is known and still explored today about the human experience has been informed by the great minds of philosophers from centuries past. In this topic of being congruent, that is, identifying one's authentic nature, Kernis and Goldman (2006) beautifully

summarize the works of many philosophers that postulated what it means to live authentically and laid the groundwork for the field of psychology to advance the knowledge further.

Tracing the literature back to Aristotle, self-knowledge and behavioral self-regulation inform how authentic functioning is currently understood and how people who engage in authentic living organize themselves and their lives. In this way, authenticity is about "sustained activity in concert with a deeply informed sense of purpose" (Kernis & Goldman, p. 285). To become less of the crowd and more of the Self, it is Kierkegaard that states that what is true is subjective and people must move beyond the untruthful crowd in order to know themselves beyond cultural expectations. The later work of Nietzsche and Sartre add to Kierkegaard in that the essence of who one *is* is found in their way of being which Heidegger later notes does not happen in isolation, but rather aligns with Sartre in that being is intended to be in existence with others in a way that reflects care and choice (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Understanding authenticity in terms of the Self in relation to others and the environment involves people coming to know themselves outside of cultural expectations and identifying what their true nature is. Authentic functioning is about acknowledging and accepting one's reality while making the conscious choice to decide how to behave in it.

Ultimately, this acknowledgment of one's place in the world brings forth anxiety. As Neville (2013) states, this anxiety comes from living and being human in a challenging world and vast universe that is frequently uncomfortable. Neville (2013) explains that the vulnerability in acknowledging the anxiety of our existence is what helps one transcend the current situation and find out what more one can be in this world.

The historical philosophical contributions of authentic functioning are summarized by Kernis and Goldman (2006) in four distinct, yet interrelated categories including (a) self-

understanding; (b) openness to objectively recognizing ontological realities; (c) actions; (d)

orientation towards interpersonal relationships. That is, authentic functioning is about "mental

and behavioural processes that account for how individuals discover, develop, and construct a

core sense of self and, furthermore, how this core self is maintained over time and situation"

(Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 293). Moving from philosophy to psychology, research aims to

explore these four components that foster authenticity/congruence within the selfhood of the

counsellor.

Psychological Construct

The psychological discourse about authenticity and authentic functioning within the

domain of counselling/psychotherapy begins with Rogers (1957) who used the term congruence

to describe the state of being wholly oneself, that is, being honest and transparent in one's

current experience. This can take place in the presence of another, such as with the client or

during supervision, but is also a way of behaving that is so aligned with one's core Self that it

does not require an audience and would almost look the same if one were alone (Kernis &

Goldman, 2006).

Having been informed by the historical philosophical perspective on authenticity, and on

the earlier psychological works of key players such as Rogers (1957), Kernis and Goldman

(2006) created the most comprehensive multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity to

date. Authenticity is defined by Kernis and Goldman (2006) as the "unimpeded operation of

one's true-or core-self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 344) and includes four distinct yet

interrelated components: awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour, and relational orientation.

Awareness is defined by one's personal knowledge of multilayered self-aspects and includes that

which may be contradictory; personal awareness is noted as the starting point toward authenticity

and authentic functioning. This self-reflective practice can explore unexamined aspects of identity that may elicit discomfort, but further work can be done to explore the source of discomfort, thus leading to self-integration and increased acceptance (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Unbiased processing is about objectively viewing one's internal life with the "relative absence of interpretive distortions" (Kernis & Goldman, p. 297), such as defensiveness, which leads to an accurate sense of self that aids in behavioural choices, likely through means of increased self-compassion. Behaviour involves "behaving in accord with one's values, preferences, and needs as opposed to acting 'falsely' merely to please others or to attain rewards or avoid punishments" (Kernis & Goldman, p. 298) and is seen as the result of awareness and unbiased processing. Authenticity in relational orientation includes "valuing and striving for openness, sincerity, and truthfulness in one's close relationships" (Kernis & Goldman, p. 300). This is characterized as being real with others, by allowing oneself to be known through one's actions and motives. To do so involves building secure attachments in relationship with others that fosters the ability to be authentically expressive without fear of retribution, thereby likely leading to healthier and more mutually satisfying relationships.

A lack of authenticity, or inauthenticity, has been historically viewed in the literature as "deceit, secrecy, imposter tendencies, self-monitoring, compliance and self-deception" (Harter, 2005, p. 382), leading to what can be called false-self behaviour. This false-self can be regarded as being phony, hiding one's true thoughts/feelings, or saying things to please others. These acts compromise the individual's true self and is felt at the subjective level as being inauthentic, thus often leading to internal tension. Burks and Robbins (2012) note that inauthenticity can be felt by clients and that the therapist need be willing to own how they may be impeding the process of building the therapeutic relationship; this can create an opportunity for increased mindfulness,

modelling, and repairing. Inauthenticity can also lead to client's quitting therapy, a negative

reputation for the field, and poor health for the therapist (Burks & Robbins, 2012).

The potential downside to authenticity and its components may inevitably include bearing

witness to painful and negative information about the Self (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). With

respect to awareness, becoming familiar with one's limitations may be a challenging experience

to process (e.g., being at the beginning of counsellor training and learning in supervision that

one's skills are not yet finely tuned). The same can be said for unbiased processing as it is likely

that one will experience negative information about the Self; however, remaining secure but

flexible with one's self-concept will lead to high psychological functioning, whereas distorting

the information to preserve the Self leads to decreased functioning and less authenticity. Burks

and Robbins' (2012) expanded the conceptualization of authenticity in the psychotherapeutic

setting noting that it is a transitory and ever-evolving process that includes understanding the

parts of the Self that are "unknown, repressed, or emotionally painful" (p. 86) and that one has a

choice to move towards the internal sensation that is provoked or move away from it.

Authentic behaviour in most, if not all, contexts and social roles will likely lead to losing

favour by others, especially with those persons struggling to live authentically themselves, and

may have negative consequences, such as alienation (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). However,

behaving in a way that is incongruent with the Self (i.e., false-self behaviour) merely to save face

with others or avoid repercussions is known to have adverse effects on well-being (Harter,

2005); therefore, becoming familiar with one's authentic Self and behaving authentically may be

a risk worth taking. Moments of inauthenticity are just as much an opportunity to explore and

grow in the relationship as are moments of authenticity, all leading to "deep reciprocal

attunement and collaboration" (Burks & Robbins, 2012, p. 97). As counsellors constantly enter

into new relationships throughout their professional careers, it is vital to explore what is involved in the process.

Counsellor Identity

The intersection of personal and professional qualities of a counsellor is unique to the counselling profession as no other occupational outcome hinges as much on personality and way of being as it does within counselling/psychotherapy. Cultivating an authentic/congruent way of being is essential for counsellors as research clearly indicates that it is the personality of the therapist that is of most use within the therapeutic relationship and brings about therapeutic change (Rønnestad & Skovolt, 2003). The interest then lies in how a therapist comes to integrate their personal identity with their professional identity in order to connect with the inner guidance and knowing that ultimately reveals much about the whole Self, the other, and the therapeutic relationship.

Personal

Harter (2005) states that factors influencing authenticity begin in childhood, but truly start to take shape in adolescence as we begin to take on multiple selves in order to fit in to social roles and across relational contexts (i.e., work, school, friends, family). The image of what one "ought" to be based on social role expectations effectively alienates the individual from their true Self (Horney, 1950). The more unrealistic the image and the more it is constructed with the intention of obtaining approval from others, the more removed a person becomes from their authentic way of being (Harter, 2005). How self-alienation or one's authentic nature comes to be has much to do with attachment theory, attunement, and self-efficacy.

Attachment. Attunement between infant/child and caregiver is when the caregiver shows subtle yet meaningful cues to the infant that they understand one another. The extent to which

caregiver and child align or misalign these cues is the extent to which the child's attachment system is formed. These attunement cues occur every minute of interaction. It is not merely enough for the caregiver to mimic the infants' display of emotion (i.e., eye contact, squealing, pointing), but rather, the caregiver must respond back with their own display of emotion to convey to the infant that they understand what is going on for them internally. This leads to intersubjectivity (Stern, 1985). Intersubjectivity is a reciprocal experience shared between caregiver and child that represents the comprehensive emotional, intentional/motivational, attentional, reflective, and behavioural experience of the other and comes from shared experience and attunement. For healthy, secure attachment to form based on the principles of intersubjectivity, the realities of children and adolescents need to be validated through listening and unconditional positive regard, another tenet of Rogers model for therapeutic change (Harter, 2005; Rogers, 1957). It is through communication that the child/adolescent comes to internalize their strengths and own their authentic nature. Adolescent and adult relationships show similar needs with the added challenge of balancing autonomy with connection (Harter, 2005). Fostering this independence and interdependence in a healthy way leads to increased self-esteem, cheerfulness, and authenticity; therefore, the truest sense of Self is continuously formed through connection with others and growth within the relationship (Harter, 2005). Understanding the basics of attunement and attachment needs informs the developing counsellor of their early priming for connection and can serve as a guide for what it feels like to genuinely connect with another in a therapeutic way.

Attunement. Attunement within the therapist toward their own experience is vital in order to connect and create space for the possibility of learning, growth, and change for the client seeking support. By being attuned, the therapist can come to integrate their internal information

and use it to benefit the therapeutic interaction with considerate timing and intention; therefore, it is crucial to understand how attunement, which leads to congruence, is invited and encouraged in the personal experience of the therapist. How a therapist models congruence within the therapeutic relationship is how Rogers' views an incongruous client learning to trust their inner experience and begin exploring what it would be like to begin living from a more congruent place (Rogers, 1957). In order to be with oneself and serve as an authentic model, we must first understand more about the experiences of counsellors/therapists approaching their experience this way.

Self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy, in minimal terms, is the belief one holds about what one can do with the skills they possess under a variety of circumstances. These beliefs are crucial to human competence and fluctuate even when people know they possess the necessary skills to perform a task or face novel situations where skills must often be remolded (Bandura, 1997). In cultivating self-efficacy, Lerner (1993) notes that false-self behaviour can also be viewed as experimentation by one who wishes to "try on" a new characteristic such as feeling more confident rather than anxious in social situations or more in tune with their inner experience instead of closed off. Lerner asserts that "[s]ometimes[sic] pretending is a form of experimentation or imitation that widens our experience and sense of possibility; it reflects a wish to find ourselves in order to be ourselves" (Lerner, 1993, p. 16). This shines a light on the possibility of renegotiating our inner selves, perhaps working through and taking off old notions of who we were told we were, how we came to present ourselves in order to be connected to others and find our way back to the selves that always existed but have long been hidden. In this way, finding ourselves as counsellors is as much experimentation as it

is for our clients who are finding ways to renegotiate their authentic selves in the presence of an accepting other, perhaps after years of living as a false-self.

Counsellor trainees need to possess some level of self-efficacy prior to experiencing authenticity in their counsellor role, but the factors leading up to a change in authenticity still need to be explored (Mayton, 2017, as cited in Mayton, 2018). Authenticity, supervision, and direct client hours significantly predicted increased self-efficacy amongst counselling trainees (Mayton, 2018). More specifically, a high-quality supervisory relationship and increased clinical hours were linked to authenticity, which implies that authenticity serves to modulate the connection to self-efficacy. Research also shows that a stable core sense of Self buffers the effect of professional self-doubt and promotes healthy reflexivity for therapists, inclining them to be open and curious about the practice and engagement with clients (Nissen-Lie et al., 2017). Those willing to actively explore personal and professional concerns within supervision demonstrated positive progress in therapeutic outcomes. When the therapist can hold a secure view of themselves as a person, they can mindfully model dealing with challenges in a way that the client may then adopt in their life outside of the therapeutic space.

In support, Mayton's (2018) research also showed that having a higher quality supervisory relationship resulted in greater levels of authenticity amongst counsellor trainees. Thus, focussing on authenticity within training programs needs to be emphasized in order to bolster the student and benefit the clients (Mayton, 2018). The supervisory relationship may also serve as a safe space for counsellor trainees to experiment with their authenticity.

Professional

While elements such as work-experience, perceived competency, and professional development all factor into a counsellor's evolution, ultimately, it is the personal work that has been identified as the most influential core aspect shaping professional identity and growth (Alves & Gazzola, 2011). Avis (2010) shares the viewpoint that the way in which a counsellor applies themself in the relationship is the key factor in affecting the therapeutic relationship. According to Avis (2010), how one does this is affected through self-reflection (often stemming from personal therapy) and supervision. Since work conditions often dictate the model followed within the therapeutic space (e.g., Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Solution-Focused Therapy) and strongly influences professional identity (Alves & Gazzola, 2011), finding a way to work with clients that fits a more internally congruent method is an important aspect of training and discovery for counsellors. Avis (2010) notes that strong personal beliefs and philosophical views propel counsellors to advocate for clients and endeavour to embrace other ways of being with them as opposed to doing the work to them.

Training. Novice counsellors realize throughout their early stages of training that the extent to which they notice and allow their personality to be of use is the extent to which they integrate the personal with the professional aspects of the work (Rønnestad & Skovolt, 2003). To do so, requires training and attuning to the inner experience, both body and mind, of the counsellor. Synthesizing historical models of what has been discussed as focusing, therapeutic presence, congruence, embodied self-awareness, and mindfulness, Peace and Smith-Adcock (2018) advocate for the training of what they have amalgamated and termed felt-sense awareness.

Felt-sense awareness includes three stages: 1. openness to felt experience, 2. attending to felt experience, and 3. using felt experience. Likening the inner openness of the counsellor to the quiet space that is made for the session, creating an inner landscape of awareness is about self-attunement and acceptance that goes beyond the in-session experience and truly takes hold throughout the life of the counsellor (Peace & Smith-Adcock, 2011). By being open and acknowledging that the internal experience is useful and valid, the therapist can welcome the event in to the here-and-now experience of therapy and use it as a guidepost for the session. Attending to the inner experience follows being open to its arising, akin to Omylinska-Thurston and James' (2011) experience of processing whereby internal coping strategies are used to navigate what is arising within. In attending, the therapist learns to regulate what is surfacing within them (i.e., their bodily sensations) as it may pertain to them, the client, and/or the relationship. Using the felt experience is the final stage in the framework and involves how and when, if at all, the inner information of the therapist is used in session with the client. Deciding to use the experience brings in the humanistic perspective of transparency and congruence and can involve describing the experience in the therapist's words or helping the client to find their own words to describe what was perceived whilst not losing one's own embodied experience.

Educators can use this guide for felt-sense awareness and assist novice counsellors to become familiar and comfortable with their inner resources (Peace & Smith-Adcock, 2011). Utilizing basic principles of mindfulness such as watching and noting bodily sensations during classes (such as in role-play) or during supervision, or encouraging students to keep a journal of things they are curious about within themselves are ways to invite attunement into practice. Felt-sense modeling can be done between supervisor and therapist trainee as a means to practice before the trainee begins working with clients. In creating an environment of learning and

acceptance for this inner knowing, beginning therapists venture early on in their training and careers to trust themselves and to use the innate knowing within their bodies to guide their own learning and healing which will later serve their clients.

Furthermore, experiential training that focuses on building capacity for relational depth in counselling has been shown to produce greater feelings of authenticity amongst counsellor trainees. Within the training curricula, the authenticity felt at this level promoted the increased use of immediacy and compassionate confrontation, as well as greater emotional content and deeper connectedness between counsellor and client (Ray et al., 2021). The training helped the counsellors to become more reflexive and accepting of themselves as people and as professionals in the learning phase of their journey, and this self-acceptance directly translated in to the work with clients as the counsellors felt more authentically themselves than ever before (Ray et al., 2021).

Supervision. When faced with challenges in the development of their professional skills, counsellors with higher levels of authenticity sought support through supervision (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Rønnestad and Skovolt (2003) note the inherent vulnerability of counsellor trainees as they enter the beginning student phase of their development and note how pivotal the supervisory relationship is in supporting and fostering early student anxieties. Furthermore, collaborative supervision is crucial for gently shaping professional identity (Auxier et al., 2003) by way of a recycling identity formation process model that includes conceptual learning, experiential learning, and external evaluation. Transitioning from conceptual (e.g., course work and readings) to experiential learning (e.g., group therapy, supervision, skills classes, and clients) involves reflexivity towards emotional awareness in order to affect change on interpersonal behaviours. External evaluation, by way of validation or disconfirmation of self-concept, was a

shaping factor in this change process that provoked much anxiety for participants within the

supervisory process. Validation presented as challenging to accept if it felt insincere and other

outside feedback was solicited if challenges to self-concept were made by the supervisor.

Cycling through each component was part of the reflexive process as participants progressed

through their training program and was often discussed in supervision (Auxier et al., 2003).

These early vulnerabilities and anxieties mirror that of some wary clients whom the students will

no doubt encounter later in their developmental process.

By the advanced student phase, shifting occurs for the counsellor in training, while

recognizing how much learning is still required about themselves and the therapeutic process

(Auxier et al., 2003). In this stage, students are learning to differentiate themselves and are

finding the avenue and model for working that is more authentic to their personality. Entering in

to the novice professional phase after leaving the safe nest of being a student, counsellors begin

to realize the extent that their personalities are displayed in their work and it is precisely this

aspect, the integration of the personal and professional, that is pivotal to the advancement of the

work. When the therapist can integrate their own authentic style of such things as appropriately

timed humour, integration is truly taking hold. Hence, exploring vulnerability in supervision

requires an attitude of openness that is imperative to growth and development and a willingness

to explore the complexities of the work (Rønnestad & Skovolt, 2003).

Congruence in the Therapeutic Space

In the therapeutic relationship, Neville (2013) states it is up to the therapist to own their

perspective in the world, that is, take accountability for one's anxiety, in order to listen and make

room for the movement of the client towards congruence. This is done by integrating oneself in

to the relationship and allowing the client's discomfort to be known and felt deeply. In

acknowledging the discomfort of existence, counsellor and client can collectively work towards

embracing and accepting their place in the world and begin healing.

Use of Self

Often engaging in practices of mindfulness, authentic people demonstrate an increased

ability to attend and describe arising internal states, the capacity to have present moment focus,

and an overall stance of non-judgement (Omylinska-Thurston & James, 2011; Kernis &

Goldman, 2006). This leads to the understanding that an open and accepting relationship towards

the Self is connected to a similar openness and relating to the external (e.g., the client,

supervisor, or peer) (Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

Honest and mindful self-disclosure of the therapist, accurate and useful reflections on

client behaviour, and pointed questions that reflect the personhood of the therapist are viewed as

tactful practices that can elicit a greater therapeutic alliance because doing so demonstrates

empathy and regard for who the client is (Klein et al., 2001). In being genuine, Klein et al.

(2001) point back to Rogers who noted that a good therapist is grounded in their own experience

and uses their own congruence to guide them towards what may be occurring for the client, that

is, towards accurate empathy and unconditional positive regard, which serve as necessary

reinforcers to congruence (Rogers, 1957). The extent to which the client experiences these

aspects of the therapist and is willing to self-explore and express serves to heighten the

therapist's ability to match their client and create a reciprocal exchange (Klein et al., 2001).

Kolden et al.'s (2018) meta-analysis upholds Klein et al.'s (2001) findings that congruence is a

vital element of the psychotherapy relationship and is reliably associated with and predictive of

client change.

Authentically being and engaging occurs both within the therapist and the client, but also between them as an experiential quality of the relationship. Being that each person, both therapist and client, is unique, Kolden et al. (2018) suggest that it is always a delicate balance of what each client brings to the relationship and what is needed then from the therapist in terms of honesty and directness. Furthermore, the modality of therapy may also dictate the therapist's level of expressed authenticity (Burks & Robbins, 2012). Not all clients require nor respond to a highly congruent therapist, but those with a greater capacity within themselves for authentic presence, or those who are seeking more, will find greater comfort in the safety that a highly congruent therapist brings to the relationship (Kolden et al., 2018). Additionally, matters of cultural diversity are also important to consider, as they highlight that autonomy and independence may not be as highly regarded within some interdependently oriented clients. Kolden et al. (2018) caution that a highly congruent therapist may not be what some individuals are seeking, instead preferring someone who is more formal and authoritative. However, I believe that the adaptability of an authentic therapist, someone who is highly attuned to both their own experience and the experience of the client in the room, can traverse these differing needs while still being congruent with themselves and possibly creating more opportunity for connection with the client. I feel it is also possible to address the individual needs of the client while still being respectful to the cultural background and practices that they value.

In a multi-stage model describing the therapists use of Self, Omylinska-Thurston and James (2011) describe how therapists can begin monitoring their own internal information which involves being "present, tuned in and ready" (p. 24) to receive an internal message before an experience of discomfort arises in the presence of a client as what often follows is the therapeutic relationship becomes affected. By being tuned in, the therapist is aware of their

physical/emotional state and may notice external influences that feel significant or perhaps persistent which leads to a level of vulnerability and possible disengagement. The second stage is processing, whereby the therapist enlists the use of internal coping strategies to navigate the discomfort, ranging from a mindful stance to disconnecting, which leads to making sense of the discomfort, and is often followed by the use of supervision. Expressing the therapists uncomfortable experience with the client follows the processing stage and involves identifying appropriateness and safety within the disclosure, as well as, ensuring that the experience is used in an effective way that includes assessing for time and place within the session or after a pattern has been established. The final stage of the model, confirming, serves as a check-in with the client to see how the disclosure of discomfort has been received. This involves a sense of deeper connection for the therapists with the client which lead to shifts in the therapist's discomfort (i.e., an alleviation), changes in the therapeutic relationship, changes in the client, and a more positive view of using discomfort in the relationship (Omylinksa-Thurston & James, 2011).

Essentially, whether the alleviation of discomfort within the therapist occurred through supervision or with the client, the act of sharing it with the client serves as a model to teach them that internal awareness and the use of vulnerability can be empowering and can effect significant change. Omylinska-Thurston and James (2011) note that in order for therapists to have an accurate use of Self in the therapeutic relationship they need to learn, and be taught, how to listen to their own internal experience and remain present with themselves while remaining present with the client. This supports the research that suggests training and supervision are vital components of counsellor development, as for many people, listening to one's inner knowing is a new and relatively untrained resource.

Presence

Presence is the coming together of the core person-centred conditions of empathy, acceptance, and congruence. By becoming authentically present and using one's inner experience to guide the therapy process, client and counsellor engagement is enhanced in the here-and-now. Creating a safe and accepting atmosphere for authentic exploration includes voicing when things are uncomfortable for the client and requires humility on the part of the therapist (Burks & Robbins, 2012). In highlighting the work of James F. T. Bugental, the late existential psychotherapist who vehemently encouraged authentic living, Bradford and Sterling (2009) reiterate that "[f]acing the troubled truth of our lostness and so reconnecting with our innate capacity for being present, or "inward vision", is the secret spark of life-changing psychotherapy" (p. 325). The benefit for both client and counsellor is a sense of co-presence in the therapeutic relationship that includes receptivity (to allow what happens in a situation to matter to oneself) and expressivity (a willingness to share of oneself) to form a connection of relational depth (Cooper, 2005). This depth of presence includes an embodied sense of attunement from each party, a sense of "I know they get it and I can feel them getting it and I'm getting it too" (Cooper, 2005, p. 18), which is all based on the core underpinnings of Rogers' person-centred conditions, that is, genuine empathic acceptance. From an existentialist perspective, being present and authentic brings about anxiety (i.e., our own mortality and uncertainties about the world and how we fit in it), but how therapists support themselves and their clients in facing this anxiety through active choices can be a true cause for change and for living (Donaghy, 2002). To be vulnerable enough to be unarmed in front of another and allow oneself to be deeply known is at the root of what it means to be authentic.

Authenticity is experienced in a variety of ways and therefore is not a singular phenomenon. Rather, authenticity/congruence in psychotherapy is described as relational, and even moments of incongruence prove to be useful for navigating and strengthening the therapeutic relationship (Grafanaki & McLeod, 2002). Being present and feeling the presence of another is an active process that requires creativity and a "capacity or willingness to make use of internal, covert feelings and emotions in the service of a relationship" (Grafanaki & McLeod, 2002, p. 20). Experiences of presence, whether initiated by congruence or incongruence, have been described by counsellor and client as a feeling of flow and are noted as "affirming, life enhancing, and memorable moments" and therapists can strive to link these moments to client's every day lives outside of the therapy session (Grafanaki & McLeod, 2002, p. 30).

There are no absolutes on authenticity, it is a process of being, of remembering who we are and what we are made of and freeing ourselves from the restrictions that have limited our capacities to embrace life; therefore, encouraging a client towards an authentic path is beneficial as it is a worthy cause to help someone feel changed and more vibrant, even if the moments are fleeting (Donaghy, 2002).

Summary

As humans and counselling professionals, it is precisely our authentic connections and relationships, both inward and outward, that help us navigate our experiences, shape our reality, and promote healing. As Bradford (2019) beautifully states:

> In order to cope with the demands, abuses, seductions and other micro- or macro-aggressions and mal-attunements of the family and world, a person – both as child and adult – is compelled to cope with these pressures by developing strategies of self-defence" (p. 116).

That is, at many points along the journey we have left pieces of our authentic selves by the road and taken up inauthentic ways of being in order to survive the trip. My intention for this exploration of the experiences of counsellors reclaiming their authentic selves is to better understand the avenues they have taken to return home to their true inner knowing and how the experience has served them in relationship to themselves and their clients. More empirical research within the field of counselling with respect to authenticity is needed as our understanding of this holistic phenomenon is still developing. As authentic counsellor identity and presence has been discussed as a deeply reciprocal and socially constructed process, studying the experiences of counsellors in an exploratory and collaborative way is crucial to furthering our appreciation for this vulnerable and complex practice.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Qualitative Introduction

Qualitative inquiry is situated within the constructivist paradigm which holds that one's subjective meaning about the world is socially constructed and created (Ponterotto, 2005). This infers that people's experiences are unique and subjective, but they come to make sense of both their internal and external experiences based upon interaction with others and the world around them. Elliot and Timulak (2005) explain that qualitative research requires flexibility and reflexivity as the researcher must always be utilizing "critical self-reflection and challenging skepticism" (p. 152) with regard to the analysis and results. The researchers further note that qualitative research is about organization and procedural archiving in order to do later data checks (Elliot & Timulak, 2005). These procedures need to be well documented and transparent as means of providing validity and rigour to the qualitative approach.

According to Braun and Clarke (2018) qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and the researchers state that qualitative data analysis is about telling the stories of the meaning derived by the participant's experience. One strategy for creating this story is through in-depth interviews. For this study, I was interested in the process of meaning-making and meaning attributed by the participants in their personal exploration for authenticity. As Braun and Clarke (2018) state, the analysis is about interpreting and creating an immersive story from the richness of experience that is shared with me, rather than mining for a core truth of what it means to become authentic. As Grbich (2010) notes, the final written product is about a "creative interpretive display" (p. 181) that allows the reader to be closer to and understand the shared meaning that was created in the exchange between participant and researcher.

Exploratory Research

Taking an exploratory approach to qualitative inquiry with myself situated as the explorer, I aimed to examine the participants' stories of authentic counsellor identity in a way that brought light to their experience (Davies, 2011). My intention was to engage in a process of discovery and become a storyteller in partnership with those who share their stories with me in order to promote greater understanding of the therapist's use of Self (Stebbins, 2001). In this sense, the research process in its entirety is a vehicle for discovery, with myself and my participants navigating the road trip together. As Braun et al. (2019) note, my role as a subjective researcher is vital as I contribute to the shared meaning of the experience by bringing my own personal experience to the forefront.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

For this research, I utilized reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The rationale for choosing this method was its appropriateness of fit for the scope of study undertaken. Braun and Clarke (2018) reflect on the flexibility of their approach in stating how RTA can be performed from different theoretical viewpoints while maintaining precision and transparency. As a novice researcher, thematic analysis is a perfect entry into qualitative research, as Braun and Clarke (2006) note that it should be viewed as the foundational skillset for which later and more advanced research can be built upon. With flexibility built-in to thematic analysis, there were options for how I conducted the research, and for the purpose of this study, I conducted an inductive thematic analysis. Utilizing inductive thematic analysis entailed a bottom-up approach, meaning the data was collected for the purpose of this study only. The succeeding analysis was data-driven and therefore less entangled from the theoretical assumptions made by the researcher (me) as would have occurred in a theoretical thematic

analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a method, RTA fits within the exploration for discovery paradigm as the intention was to fully examine the data until no additional themes could be created. In this way, the data was analyzed as broadly and thoroughly possible (Stebbins, 2001).

When identifying themes, Boyatzis (1998) explains how this can be done at the semantic or latent level. At the semantic level, themes remain on the surface and explicitly reflect what was said by the participants, meaning there is no effort made by the researcher to interpret the data further. However, as qualitative research intends to go beyond mere description of what was said, written, or observed, and head towards interpretation, I have analyzed the data at the latent level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this level, the data was examined beyond its surface, semantic expression, and explored the "underlying ideas, assumptions, [sic]conceptuali[z]ations, and ideologies" (p. 13) that may have informed or given rise to how the semantic content was presented.

Understanding semantic versus latent themes for the purpose of this study involved semantic themes as being what it looks and feels like for a counsellor to be authentic, and the latent themes intended to expand on how this particular way of being came to be, that is, what the necessary components were that made it possible to be authentic. As Braun and Clarke (2006) describe, RTA with a focus on latent themes fits within the constructivist paradigm as it "seeks to theori[z]e the socio-cultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided" (p. 14). Essentially, exploring the data and identifying themes comes from a process of shared meaning making through the interview and the patterns that take shape form a "central organizing concept" of these co-constructed meanings (Braun et al., 2019, p. 845). From this account, it presupposes that how the participants identified and

utilized their authentic selves was well rooted in their experiences with others and the world

around them, that is, their experiences enabled them to be their authentic selves.

Ethical Concerns

This study was conducted in accordance with the University of Northern British

Columbia's (UNBC) research guidelines after receiving approval from the UNBC Research

Ethics Board (REB, approval #E2021.0706.032.00/01). In order to obtain approval from the

REB I completed the Course on Research Ethics (CORE) and provided a detailed account of

how the study would strictly uphold the ethical standards as outlined by UNBC. Adhering to the

ethical standards included providing the participants with information regarding what would be

involved in the participation of the study and by obtaining a written copy of their informed

consent prior to the commencement of the interview. Data management practices, as guided by

institutional policies, were also closely followed. This practice involved keeping hard copies of

the participant data protected in a locked cabinet within my secure UNBC office (ensuring

identifying information was held separate from the anonymized transcripts) and electronic

information saved on the UNBC server.

Dual relationships

Conducting research within my own community of practice in Northern British Columbia

undoubtedly opened the possibility of having dual relationships with my research participants.

There was potential for us to know one another on a personal and/or professional level be that

our educational institution and work locations are likely to have overlapped. As such, I was

transparent in my recruitment process and when discussing informed consent at the outset of the

interviews. Recruitment was free from coercion, that is, given the possibility of dual

relationships, I did not use existing relationships to fulfill my participant requirements;

participation was entirely voluntary. Additionally, in the circumstance of a dual relationship I addressed its nature at the outset of the interview. I encouraged participants to only share what they were comfortable with and acknowledged that it is common in dual relationships for participants to want to divulge more than they normally would if the researcher was unknown to them and/or not a part of an affiliated membership (Quinney et al., 2016). Dual relationships are a likely occurrence in rural and remote practice and given the positive nature of the research it was reasonable to move forward ethically.

Confidentiality and Privacy

Confidentiality and privacy are important aspects of the research. Though the current study was positive in nature, there was still a level of vulnerability present when discussing one's personal lived experience. For this reason, the participants' names were not included at the start of the interview recording and the recording was saved using a de-identified code according to the order in which the interviews were conducted (i.e., Participant 1-6). The identifying document was stored in a separate hard-copy file, away from the remaining research data, within a locked cabinet in my secure research office. Given the nature of our geographical region and singular educational institution, there was potential for an increased factor of vulnerability amongst participants as it was likely that they may refer to others in our community of practice or educational program. It was important that participants be able to speak freely about their process and include mention of others relevant to their story without concern of a confidentiality breach. Including such details from the participant narrative could have led to them being more identifiable; therefore, at the time of transcription, I removed identifying names and sensitive information such as where participants lived and/or worked. Nevertheless, the collaboration between myself and the participants at the time of their interviews ensured that we gathered

information that was rich enough to capture their story while maintaining their confidentiality

(Damianakis & Woodford, 2015). Throughout the research process, for uniquely small and

connected communities such as those in Northern B.C., it is precisely these reflexive measures

that are required in order to increase our knowledge while upholding confidentiality.

Vulnerable Populations

The topic of personal identity and authenticity as a counsellor is vulnerable, especially

regarding any past or present barriers or challenges faced during the developmental process.

Should the participants have felt too exposed or vulnerable because of the interview process I

provided them with a list of local counselling resources at the time of our introduction and

review of consent (see Appendix E). As the participants are part of the community of counsellors

already, they likely had their own resources in place to support them through this process should

the need have arisen.

Research Procedures

Recruitment of Participants

I aimed to recruit 4-8 participants from Northern B.C., which according to Vasileiou et al.

(2018) was a sufficient sample size for a qualitative study of this scope. Additionally, as a novice

researcher, utilizing a smaller sample size was an appropriate consideration for my experience

and skill level (Vasileiou et al., 2018). As qualitative inquiry is predicated on rich descriptions of

the data, the focus was on both thematic and meaning saturation, that is, providing both a breadth

and depth of participant accounts that covered the possibility of similarities and differences

regarding their authentic identity development (Yang, Qi, & Zhang, 2022). While the present

study is small in its sample size, support for identifying the basic elements of themes to satisfy

thematic saturation in small qualitative studies has been demonstrated within six open-ended interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

Participants were recruited using an open recruitment process according to criterion sampling methods that outlined the requirements of fit for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A recruitment E-mail and poster outlining the parameters of the research study and commitment required from the participants was sent via my UNBC E-mail address to public and private counselling agencies and practitioners located in Prince George, British Columbia. See Appendix A and B for recruitment materials. In order to qualify for the study, participants needed to hold a Master's degree in counselling and be affiliated with a professional organization or were awaiting professional designation having completed their degree requirements. This ensured participants would likely have experienced the type of training necessary to promote their counselling identity development. I encouraged any interested participants to contact me using the email provided and to further disseminate the email and poster to any agencies or practitioners that may be interested and met the eligibility criteria.

Overall, six individuals responded to the request for participants, all meeting the eligibility criteria. One other potential participant contacted me via E-mail, but they did not meet the eligibility criteria. As the interviews were conducted during a still heightened period of the pandemic, the recruitment process was strained so I was satisfied when I reached six participants. Five participants were located in Prince George, and one lived in a smaller community outside of Prince George. Five female participants and one male participant comprise the sample population. Participants worked in various public and private counselling settings and their professional experience ranged from 2 to 10+ years of practice. Following their initial response to participate in the study, I forwarded the participants a copy of the information letter and

informed consent (see Appendix C and D) and advised them to review prior to us meeting to conduct the interview at which time I could answer further questions if needed. Individual dates were then set to conduct the interview.

Consent

As mentioned, written voluntary informed consent was provided prior to meeting and was reiterated at the outset of the interview process. Signatures obtaining consent were obtained prior to the commencement of the interviews and additional verbal consent was gained prior to starting the audio recording. At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were notified that the recording had ended. In providing informed consent, participants were reminded that they could withdraw their consent at any time of the interview or following it, and that all information gathered would be securely shredded and removed from the UNBC server.

Interviewing

Five of the six interviews were conducted in person at the participants location of choice (i.e., workplace, home, UNBC campus) and followed the safe research protocols as outlined by the REB at UNBC (i.e., maintaining six feet of distance, wearing masks, and using alcohol sanitizer). One interview was conducted via UNBC's Zoom platform. Interviews were approximately one hour in length.

Data collection began at the outset of the semi-structured interview process. Utilizing a semi-structured interview style allowed for a natural flow of dialogue between the participants and myself as the researcher while also adhering to consistency with the chosen questions (see Appendix F for interview questions) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additional prompting and clarifying questions naturally arose as the interviews proceeded and I utilized these opportunities as a means of member-checking to ensure that I was clearly understanding the participants'

responses and the attributed meanings. At the end of the interview, I asked each participant if there was any relevant information they wished to share that I had not previously asked. The interview process was essentially the entry point of analysis as I encountered the stories that the participants shared and began forming initial thoughts and knowledge about what was being shared with me. I did not take notes during the interview, rather I remained present in relationship with the participants as we explored their understanding of authentic identity development and began to form a co-constructed understanding of their process (Mayan, 2009). In the practice of reflexivity, I recorded my initial thoughts following the interviews in a journal which was also securely stored at my UNBC office. Here I documented my concerns as a novice researcher and posed questions to myself for future interviews (e.g., was I gathering enough information to tell an accurate story? And how would this all come together?). I also commented in my journal about what it felt like to be in the presence of the participants as they shared their stories with me.

As mentioned, for transcription and data analysis purposes, I used a digital recorder during the interview regardless of interview modality (i.e., via Zoom or in-person). Each participant's interview was saved on the recorder in a separate file that corresponded to their anonymized number I created for confidentiality. The files were promptly uploaded to the UNBC server for backup and the digital recorder was secured at my UNBC office. Electronic and hard copies of the interviews and transcripts will remain with the research supervisor for two years following the conclusion of the study.

Data Analysis

In this study, I utilized reflexive thematic data analysis and conducted the analysis in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six distinct, yet fluid phases. Phase one involved

familiarizing myself with the data and ultimately began at the outset of data collection as

mentioned. As I was solely responsible for conducting the interviews, phase one began

immediately as an immersive and interactive experience with the participants. After documenting

my initial thoughts following the interviews, I re-listened to the data at least once before

beginning written transcription. Transcription of the audio recording into written verbal data

followed and served as another means of immersion and familiarization with the data. I

maintained a rigorous approach to writing down a verbatim account which included slowing

down the recording in order to capture the details of repeated words, utterances, pauses, and

affect (e.g., sighs and laughter). This ensured integrity of the data in that it retained its true form

and meaning. The end of phase one concluded with my initial thoughts about the transcribed data

of each interview and a summary of the participants' stories that I documented in my reflexive

journal.

Phase two entailed manually generating initial codes using an open and structural coding

style (Saldana, 2016). Here I wrote codes and comments directly on the transcripts. Later I

collated these codes and affiliated data extracts into a document for further analysis. This phase

is seen as a form of preliminary data analysis by Grbich (2010) and is essentially an opportunity

to begin organizing the data in order to avoid being overwhelmed at the end. As such, I began

using colour coded markers to highlight similar codes as they pertained to the data extracts.

Initial code production came from what I as the researcher found interesting about the

transcribed data and as I sorted them into meaningful groups, I cautioned not to overly interpret

or selectively highlight (Grbich, 2010). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) key advice for this

stage, I coded for as many potential themes as possible, and kept the surrounding context to

maintain that data extracts could be coded in to multiple themes (which did in fact prove

challenging in the later phases of analysis). Phase two was complete when I was able to produce

an initial conceptual map of codes which included relationships, inconsistencies, and outliers

across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After this phase was complete, I took leave from the

data analysis, giving myself time to sink in to the process of being a researcher. It was this pause

in the process that informed the ease in which I moved throughout the next phase of analysis.

Coming back to the analysis in phase three, having been renewed by a break in the

process, I moved beyond the level of codes and began analyzing for themes. I collated the

relevant coded data extracts and began the process of interpreting how they may relate to one

another to form larger main themes and sub themes. At this stage, some of the codes were

removed. This was a long and fluid process that allowed changes to the themes and the codes

that comprised them (Grbich, 2010). Drafting themes and subthemes took consistent and diligent

exploration and revision and yet the overall picture of what the data was conveying felt clear. I

questioned myself here as well, noting in my journal that I thought the process of theme

generation should have felt more complex and wondered again if I was doing it "right". I was put

at ease when I consulted Saldana (2016) who compassionately stated I was feeling exactly like

all novice researchers. I considered this stage complete when I had identified main and sub

themes that broadly conveyed the participants' stories and meanings, having organized all the

data extracts that corresponded to them.

Phase four involved reviewing the generated themes in two stages. In step one, I reviewed

the coded data extracts and determined that they formed a coherent pattern in relation to the

entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Here, some coded data extracts began to feel confusing

as they could have easily fit within other categories given the interconnected nature of the topic.

I considered placing some codes into other themes to determine if another location was better

suited which also led to a reassessment of the theme itself in some cases. Step two of this phase involved finalizing a sufficient thematic map of the entire data set. I re-read the entire data set as encouraged by Braun and Clarke (2006) in order to identify if the themes had an overall fit, and to code any additional data within the themes that may have been missed. This was an integral part of the analysis, as by this stage I had been deeply immersed in the data and could remember data extracts from the interviews that had not been included in the collated set. Here I reintroduced these extracts and found them a place within the themes and subthemes. With these stages complete, I determined that I had reached the saturation point with the data when new codes did not add any further significance to the thematic map. The end of this phase now produced an overall story about the data through the use of themes and how everything fit together.

Phase five involved defining and refining themes in a way that brought out the "essence" of what each theme embodied (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 22). At this stage I created another thematic map, this time with more of an emphasis on how the whole process interconnected as it had become clear that while each theme and its subthemes were distinct, they were also inherently woven together. This helped to provide structure and a hierarchy of meaning to some of the subthemes which informed the larger, more complex themes. In this process I reviewed the data extracts within each theme again and identified their fascinating attributes. I further refined the subthemes at this stage as creating the thematic map helped to highlight the subtleties in the stories. Phase five was complete when I was able to succinctly label the themes for the final analysis and clearly state the "scope and content" of each theme in a few sentences using their subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 22). The final thematic structure is reflective of the

data across all interviews. Table 1 provides a list of themes, subthemes, and sample codes

generated from the data.

The analysis process ended in phase six with the production of my final report that

constitutes chapters four and five of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this phase, I compiled

the themes and subthemes, along with their prevalent data extracts, into a rich narrative account

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). I intended to demonstrate how each theme was distinct, but connected,

and how everything was related to the original research question. This process involved a dual

role of sorts on my part as the researcher as being both a cultural member of the counselling

community and commentator about the process of authentic counsellor identity formation (Braun

& Clarke, 2006). Through collaboration and interpretation, I hoped to portray what the story

conveys about counsellors' experiences of developing their authentic identity and why it matters,

that is, how their being in the world has shaped their reality. The final narrative is about

demonstrating the diversity within the data and to "illuminate the many truths inherent in the

answers" that the participants shared with me (Grbich, 2010, p. 173).

Table 1.

Data Themes, Subthemes, and Sample Codes

Themes	Subthemes	Sample Codes
Dissolving Fear	Effort to Ease	- initial learning/questioning and hesitation - fear as barrier - letting go of "shoulds"
	Connection and Collaboration	- supervision as common ground/understanding - self-check and recalibration - integrate knowledge/way of being
	The Permission Slip	- granting permission to be - being invited - showing up
Surrendering to Self	The Identified Self	- inner knowing - already identified skills/abilities

	Intersection of Identity	• vulnerability overlaps • being known in other roles
	Self-Compassion and Acceptance	• fallibility of being human • being enough for clients looks different
Cultivating Capacity	Attunement	• embodied curiosity • felt sense of body • changing patterns/loud to quiet
	Testing the Connection	• trying a new way • must be created
	Dynamic Evolution	• milestone moments/stages • growing into the role • ebb and flow/build and rebuild
Aligning with Authenticity	Presence	• wordless knowing • flow • everything aligns
	The Ripple Effect	• reciprocity • anyone can model • seeing clients change

Evaluation of the Study

Rigour

While flexibility is at the heart of qualitative research, measures for evaluating the

reliability and validity of a study have become increasingly refined as a means for establishing

scientific rigour (Cypress, 2017). According to Whittmore et al. (2001), establishing criterion for

the assessment of rigour in a study is a way of marrying both the scientific and artful processes

of qualitative inquiry, and for the purpose of this study I followed their primary and secondary

criteria. Primary criteria are noted as necessary for all types of qualitative research, and include

credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity. Credibility refers to how accurately I portray

the stories as shared with me by the participants, essentially, how well I interpret another's

relative reality. Authenticity is closely linked to credibility and aims to ensure that the pluralistic

nature of the study is accounted for, meaning that the myriad differences amongst the

participants' lived experiences are accurately reflected in addition to keeping my own

perspective as the inquiring researcher in check. Criticality and integrity as measures of validity

pertain to me as the researcher in that I needed to constantly assess and reassess my own biases,

negative assumptions, and initial interpretations in order to keep true to the data. These measures

involved a methodical revisiting of the data to assess my understanding while bearing constantly

and consistently in mind that there may have been discrepancies I had not previously attended to

(Whittmore et al., 2001).

Secondary criteria, according to Whittmore et al. (2001), can be used more flexibly as

they pertain to the type of study undertaken and include creativity, vividness, explicitness,

thoroughness, and congruence. Explicitness involved leaving a traceable account of what I as the

researcher have done – a breadcrumb trail of sorts for my arrival at an interpretation. Vividness

entailed providing a rich account of the data, while being mindful not to overwhelm with details.

Creativity involved the flexible approach to data collection, analysis, and representation that is

inherent in qualitative research while still being grounded in the scientific process of answering

unique research questions. Thoroughness pertained to the comprehensive connections made

between data and interpretations. It involved going beyond a mere listing of themes to fully

explaining all the possible ways the data related to the research question (i.e., saturation).

Congruence involved how each element and phase of the study fit together and within the

broader body of study about the phenomena. The final criteria of validity within qualitative

research is sensitivity. Sensitivity meant being aware of the human, cultural, and social contexts

that the research was conducted within and for (Whittmore et al., 2001). In this study, I believe

explicitness, vividness, congruence, and sensitivity were most significant, in addition to the

primary criteria, and I utilized various techniques to demonstrate how I ensured validity, and

therefore a trustworthiness throughout the process.

In addressing credibility and authenticity, I ensured that all interviews were digitally audio recorded to enable a verbatim transcription of the participants' responses. Since none of the participants wished to receive their transcriptions, I ensured that I was accurately understanding their accounts at the time of the interview as a means of member-checking. I did this with follow-up questions and clarifying statements to confirm that I had captured the nuances in each of their stories (Whittemore et al., 2001). As a member of the counselling community, I feel I was able to do this with accuracy, intent, and understanding. Following the interviews, participants shared with me that the questions asked of them were thought provoking and that the process of the interview was stirring new insights and reflections upon their developmental process. One participant became curious about possible differences between men and women in their identity as counsellors regarding the role that parenthood plays. Many participants shared that the experience of the interview was the first in some time that they had reflected in such a way, and for one participant it was their first shared experience. As stated earlier, to guarantee criticality and integrity with the study I kept a reflexive journal to record initial reflections following the interview and throughout the analysis process so that I could refer to each stage and engage with the data and the thoughts, feelings, and assumptions that had arisen at the time.

As the nature of thematic analysis, and qualitative inquiry in general, is quite flexible, I aimed to demonstrate trustworthiness as best I could as a novice researcher by documenting my process along the way. Regarding the secondary criteria of explicitness, the employment of journaling ensured that my potential biases could be uncovered, addressed, and included in the final text along with the methodological steps. For example, I wondered if my own developmental process was influencing the analysis and questioned whether I was trying to

categorize the participants' stories in a way that made sense according to my own lived experience. Reflecting back in my journal, and upon the thematic map that I had created, I found comfort, and in fact experienced excitement, in the themes and subthemes that felt universal among us. Although each participant navigated their journey in their own way, there were pieces of their stories that aligned with one another and that is what is reflected in the final analysis.

Vividness was achieved through the inclusion of verbatim extracts from participant stories which were woven together to add richness to the final text. Taken together, in addition to my voice as the researcher being the one that shares these stories, I aimed to write these accounts in simple and clear language that allowed for the inherent beauty of deep personal and professional understanding to come through. Working towards congruence in the study involved awareness at every level of the process to ensure that each stage, and the steps that comprised it, were a logical fit and served to answer the research question and further what is known about authentic counsellor identity development. Lastly, sensitivity was of great consideration as I worked in cooperation with my participants to give voice to their story. I have shared my position as the researcher in chapter 1 and I also located myself with my participants at the time of interview in order to demonstrate that I am aware of my own position of privilege in hearing their stories. Throughout this process I have consulted with my supervisor as a means of safeguarding the accounts that have been shared with me which ensured that I handled them with care, both in the context and use of the research, but also as privileged insight in to their lives. I found myself at times not being sure of how much of the participants' stories to include, that is, how much was needed to convey a consistent thread among them or how to explain a difference without losing that thread. I often found myself wanting to include everything from the data sets as the participants' stories were so rich, and so I again would discuss with my supervisor to

ensure that I was remaining within scope and intent. As a novice researcher, these check-ins were critical to my process in upholding the integrity of the research. In focusing on validity as a means of producing a sound scientific study, the very nature of creative expression and depth of understanding that is the hallmark of qualitative inquiry has not been lost.

Reflexivity

Putting reflexivity in to practice as a novice researcher, I must admit a perquisite of privilege in the likelihood of personal and professional gain through the shared experience of this process. Conducting interviews, working through the stages of RTA, and identifying and interpreting individual accounts of self-discovery, there was undoubtedly going to be insight gleaned from others that share my same profession. Having understood this up front, I felt I was well situated to continually process my reflections and put them in context as the process unfolded. No different than the process of conducting a literature review, I aimed to place myself in the arena of study and learn from those that have come before. I observed with curiosity and engagement to see how I too am part of the group (Montouri, 2005). Learning from the participants in this study has allowed me to further engage in the arena as a researcher, counsellor, colleague, and journeyer.

Summary

The methodological framework of the study is exploratory in nature and examined the socially constructed phenomenon of being and becoming an authentic counsellor. As qualitative inquiry is situated within the constructivist paradigm, the subjective meaning that each participant shared about their experiences of developing their authentic identity has been unique and has been socially constructed with others along their journey and now again with me, the researcher, in this process of storytelling. In gathering and analyzing these stories using RTA, an

increased depth of understanding for the variable processes that underlie what it means to be authentic in the therapeutic relationship follows and adds to the existing literature that aims to understand counsellor identity development. Expanding what is known about the impact of counsellor authenticity on client change may serve current and future counsellors in developing a stronger, more integrated identity and thus model for clients a way of being in the world that is more aligned with one's inner guidance.

To conduct this research, participants were recruited using an open recruitment process according to criterion sampling methods that outlined their requirements of fit for the study. Consent was voluntary and obtained at the outset of the interviews, and the responsibility and transparency on my part as the researcher and member of the counselling community was addressed. As participants in this research are counsellors themselves, the ethical concerns were minimal; however, steps were taken to ensure safety and confidentiality during the process and counselling resources were provided.

Data analysis occurred in six phases and concluded when saturation had been achieved through a thorough review of the data. Primary criteria of credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity ensured trustworthiness of the evaluation and included member-checking during the interview to guarantee that I had accurately captured and portrayed the participants' stories in accordance with their views. Reflexivity was also a crucial part of the entire process to ensure that my thoughts, feelings, and interpretations were utilized respectfully and with integrity towards the research.

The development of the counsellor is a lifelong process and intersects both the personal and professional aspects of the individual in a way unlike any other profession. How one comes to understand their unique attributes and integrate them in the therapeutic relationship strongly

influences client change. As the field of counselling and psychotherapy now understands that it is the counsellor's authentic use of Self—their presence—in the therapeutic relationship that offers vital clues and direction for therapy, increasing the body of knowledge of the necessary conditions that affect this crucial aspect is necessary to advance the field and promote healing.

Chapter Four: Findings

Based on the six interviews conducted, four main themes were generated from the data analysis. These themes are distinct and progressive and function overall in a synergistic manner. The four themes are: Dissolving Fear, Surrendering to Self, Cultivating Capacity, and Aligning with Authenticity.

Dissolving Fear

In this interdependent and seemingly cyclical process of authentic identity development, Dissolving Fear functions both as the starting point for many of the participants at the outset of their journey, and as a placeholder, a position to return to when new challenges arose. Three subthemes delineate the larger theme and include: effort to ease, where the participants moved from a place of uncertainty and hesitation towards familiarity, connection and collaboration, where the movement towards self-reflection and trust in relationships began, and the permission slip, whereby autonomy and choice was granted.

Effort to Ease

Like many new challenges, the outset of the beginner's journey in counselling was fraught with fear, self-doubt, and uncertainty. In the early stages of development, participants extensively reflected on where they were in their process of self-discovery and many questioned what it was that they had to offer to their clients and moreover how much of themselves to show. This period of self-assessment highlighted the tumultuous phase these new professionals had entered in to or were encountering anew and the self-reflection process that would become necessary to continue the developmental endeavour and eventually give rise to ease.

The effort portion of this subtheme denotes the initial struggle that participants expressed as they began to explore themselves and their practice. Participants questioned themselves

regarding how much of their personality or identity to bring into the therapy room and therapeutic relationship, that is, what level of appropriate self-disclosure was necessary for them to satisfy the sense that they were showing up both for themselves and their clients. Participant One noted that in the beginning they were trying to keep their personal and professional identities separate, and that they tried to create a professional role that would be deemed "useful", "I was working so hard, and I was so tired…learning the balance of when to share and when not to share and in the beginning there's so much thinking going on."

Participant Four stated that for, "…three or four years at the beginning I had quite a crisis of trying to get congruence or coherence between my understanding of Self, my understanding of the world at large, and my counselling practice". Likewise, Participant Two boldly described fear as being the biggest barrier to authenticity, "fear of not being good enough, fear of feeling like an imposter, fear of rejection, fear of embarrassment, always fear…and it morphs depending on who is in the room", so for them, "authenticity is always about fighting against feeling inadequate, always." Similarly, Participant Six noted that when they are in a place of fear that "the barrier in and of itself is actually me not anything else that's kind of going on" and described the self-inflicted pressure to perform, an urgency to do something that arose whilst in the clutches of fear. The pressure and cognitive process of thinking they needed to fill the therapy space with a tool, a skill, or a theory was shared by the participants when experiencing fear and self-doubt in the early stages of their development.

Another barrier encountered by many of the participants that led to feelings of uncertainty, discomfort, and hesitation in the early stages of development was an often-misguided notion of how a professional counsellor ought to represent themselves. Messages often came from their training or work environment that dictated a prescribed identity style that

felt incongruent with the counsellor and added to the initial effort of their developmental process. Participant Three stated, "I sort of had this vision like counsellors in their private lives shouldn't make any mistakes…almost like setting an example of how to do everything right". Participant Three also expressed the fear that clients would expect them to have all the answers, a notion that was also previously held by Participant Two.

In addressing these "shoulds" of what it means to be a counsellor and identifying if they are germane to their developmental process, participants regularly found that these messages were not in alignment and began exploring ways to shed these prescribed notions of identity, behaviour, and professionalism. From their perspective, Participant Four described their experience of employers "shoulds" for professional conduct and counselling objectives as being solely results based and theory driven and noted that they could not fulfill both functions, that is, "meet the societal expectations of what a counsellor should be like, but also at the same time doing what I think is integral, coherent, with who I am."

This results-based prescribed way of being was also experienced by Participant Six in the early stages of their career, noting that their cooperation with public health agencies often required them to label and quantify their work, to "prove" that they were effective at their job, a task that felt incongruent with their style. Thankfully, the agency they worked for supported them and encouraged them to continue doing the work in the way that felt true, "I got to shed needing to prove it, but then kept being forced to try and prove it, but thankfully I didn't fall into the trap."

In dissolving expectations put upon them, Participant Three shared an experience of being given a script by their supervisor to use with clients and noted that after using it they felt "gross" and it felt "more harsh" than if they had used their own words. This experience of going against

the Self and acting as directed by a supervising clinician caused distress for Participant Three in their early years as a counsellor as they felt compelled to follow orders from the well-regarded and experienced clinician.

In contrast, a simple, but impactful action proposed by a supervisor helped Participant Five move closer to their authentic Self and away from the prescribed notions of professionalism with respect to the clothes they wore to work, "I don't have to show up in a way that I think I should be showing up, I can just show up how I am and what fits for me". For Participant Five, letting go of expectations also included those that they had held for their supervisors or people in positions of authority in general; in doing so, they humanized these individuals, and began to take accountability for their own learning which later resulted in feeling more confident to ask for help when needed.

Facing new challenges in the later developmental stages as a counsellor often resulted in the resurgence of fear and of uncertainty for one's capacity to understand, embrace, and tackle the task at hand. The difference being that for the beginning stages of identity development, the skills and understanding of the Self had yet to be established, rendering the participants at a bit of an effortful impasse. The later stages of development brought about more ease, that is, a familiarity to the process of uncovering the roots of fear and bringing out one's authentic Self. Participant Two reflected:

> It used to be really overwhelming and I'd leave a session after something like that fear and I'd leave going like, "Oh, I just screwed up that session and I did nothing" and I'd get so afraid…to now I just let it be, I let the anxiety not take over but just be there…yeah, I was afraid in there that I wasn't enough, that's okay, that's happened before and it's okay.

Ten years in to being a counsellor, Participant Three felt that the ease came from being more "comfortable" in all the other areas of their life and that the previous expectations of how a counsellor "should" conduct themselves eventually dissipated when they realized that certain situations they had feared or were warned about never came to fruition. Participant Six described their unique circumstance of facing a new challenge in their identity development, where fear was present again and a sense of their authentic Self felt more distant. Nevertheless, they knew that the discovery process for what authentically awaited within them was a familiar one:

> Whatever used to cover up that authentic space for me I got so good at being able to like manage it and like deal with it, that whatever is covering it now is something bigger or something maybe not bigger, just as big, but different.

Connection and Collaboration

With fear slowly dissolving, participants described the increase in connection that began to take place both within themselves and with trusted others around them. All the participants described this as an active process, carried out to increase the self-discovery process and continue dispelling fear. Five out of six participants sought the support of colleagues or supervisors in a professional self-development capacity, and four out of six participants enlisted the additional support of their friends and family. Participant One explained the relationship between them and their supervisor as making the most impactful difference in their life, that the connection they had formed was what propelled them to enter the profession and to continue believing in themselves when fear surfaced. Participant Two noted:

> If I haven't gone to supervision in a while, if I haven't been really reflective in that way with another professional, I start to feel off, I start to feel less authentic…being in supervision is like a compass, like it pulls me, this is who you are.

In reflecting on their personal relationship, Participant Three described the genuine "take it or leave it" self-accepting attitude of their partner as a "peaceful" experience and the way in which they themselves were able to start connecting with the more vulnerable aspects of their own identity. They later experienced this same attitude and behaviour amongst their colleagues at their second place of employment, which was a drastic shift from their first. Participants Two, Three, and Six expressed gratitude for the colleagues that were doing the self-reflective work alongside them, for being vulnerable enough to voice when things were difficult and to allow them the opportunity to breathe a sigh of relief in the safety and togetherness of the experience. As Participant Two put it, "when I'm talking to a fellow therapist, I can say this is what came up for me in the room, this is what it felt like, and I know they have a sense of what I'm talking about." Uniquely, Participant Four did not seek the external support of friends, family or other counselling professionals, but rather turned to literature and the boundless works of great writers, psychologists and philosophers, for their connection, collaboration, and comfort. The connection and collaboration they formed was with their clients and helped them shift from a felt sense of being an observer in life to an active participant.

The Permission Slip

The final subtheme of Dissolving Fear is the act of being granted permission. Experienced by all the participants, this invitation was one that evoked a come-as-you-are acceptance and arose within them as an offering of their own volition or from outside sources. Many of the participants described moments where a mentor, colleague, or supervisor welcomed them to show up as themselves, amidst the fear and self-doubt, and begin a new chapter of their practice and ultimately a new chapter of their identity. Even if permission was initially offered from an external source, its invitation was quickly adopted and internalized by many of the participants.

Participant One described being fully known, accepted, and encouraged by their supervisor to show up in all their "messiness" and how this was a transformative experience for them. Participant Two granted themselves permission to "just be there and not solve", that they did not have to do anything with their clients and how this process had evolved over time from a conscious reminding to an embodied knowing. During the heightened challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, Participant Three described giving themselves "permission to kind of suck at work sometimes" as they reprioritized life's other challenges. Participant Four shared a pivotal experience whereby they recognized their neurodiversity and thus began to expand their inner world through vocabulary in order to make sense of themselves and their experience with clients. In the early stages of their identity development process, Participant Six explained their sense of inner knowing that there was more of themselves that they wanted to show up in their work while also questioning if being "too real" or "too authentic" meant they were losing sight of the work. With consistent reminders from a formative colleague and supervisor, Participant Six recognized that how they wanted to show up was exactly what was needed in their work and was repeatedly reminded that, "this is you, this is part of you, you know how to do this because you innately have that ability to just be you in that space and be okay with it." Later in their development, Participant Six was further encouraged by supervisors to expand their authentic counselling identity to a "just me identity" out in the world.

Surrendering to Self

Surrendering to Self is the second theme created from the data and encapsulates the participants' ability to recognize and trust their innate abilities and intuitions as fear loses its grip and belief in the connection both within Self and with reliable others (including clients) intensified. The three subthemes that comprise this theme include: the identified Self, which

involves the realization and promotion of innate instincts and abilities; intersection of identity, which incorporates broader roles beyond the counselling identity; and self-compassion and acceptance, which explores the evolution of grace and understanding required to bring the Self forward.

The Identified Self

With fear and self-doubt lessening, each participant identified a sense of inner knowing, a guiding sense of Self that they wanted to align with and operate from. Many of the participants expressed an acknowledgement of innate skills and abilities, as well as intuition, that they came to the role of counsellor with, but with fear often getting in the way, could not reliably access earlier in their development. Now in the phase of surrendering to that inner knowing, participants reflected on how they were bringing their identified Selves to the forefront.

Participant Two shared their understanding of themselves as having a natural relatability towards others and that what they brought to the counselling role was innate curiosity and empathy, which gave them an early sense of ease in the therapeutic space. In reflecting back to the prescribed "shoulds" of counselling that Participant Three experienced with their first supervisor, they came to recognize that what they first deemed as a lack of confidence for the work and way in which they were being told to conduct themselves was simply just not their way of being. They identified that although their supervisor had decades of experience and was viewed as a model by many, that they themselves simply did not align with that way of relating to clients. This experience was shared by Participant Five who, a few years into their practice, acknowledged that how they had been showing up in their role as a counsellor was in fact not conducive to who they were and began to question how they could better align with the authentic Self they could feel emerging. For Participant Five, following their intuition meant changing

employers and asking for help from their colleagues and supervisors, something they previously struggled to do, and thus moving through this vulnerable growth process allowed them to feel more authentic and continue their development:

> Every time I followed my intuition and spoke up about something that wasn't working for me or something that didn't feel right, I think that was helping to propel me forward in my development…and I think I understood that for the first time in working with people who are showing up and being vulnerable themselves.

Participant Four acknowledged a sense of knowing that they processed the world differently than others and that this was the reason for their lifelong difficulty in understanding emotions and experiencing empathy. Participant Four knew they had to make a "narrative framework" from which to hang their feelings, reactions, and intellect upon in order to enrich their understanding of the Self and the world around them. This created ability for language was the strength they later relied upon. For Participant Six, their inner knowing was an intuitive understanding of the impact of Self on others and the significance of the therapeutic relationship, and that being authentic was the way in which that relationship could be established:

> Ultimately, at the end of the day, you can have all the fluff and technique you want in the world, but you being human in the world is actually what's most important and what's most connecting in the relationship.

Intersection of Identity

All the participants noted their desire to integrate themselves into their work as a counsellor, that their identity could not be held separately, and that in fact the personal is professional. For some, this integration of identity was made clear in the early stages of their training and development, such as with Participant Three when they reflected on the times that

they and their peers questioned how their education was impacting their life and how their life

was impacting their education and work. Of note, Participant Two stated that, "most of what I

realize is that what I'm dealing with in my life comes up in my work…it always relates back to

me, always." Participant Four shared that as their counselling identity developed, their whole

identity intersected with it, that they were not comprised of "island[s] of understanding" but

rather integrated all their aspects of being, such as when they are with their partner and family or

when they are alone and absorbed in a book. This "intrusion" into who they are, as Participant

Four put it, was welcomed and noted by five of the six participants, and authentically engaging

with others across roles and contexts was deemed vital to their identity. For Participant Five, it is

the role of counsellor where they feel most themselves, that they seem to struggle with their

authenticity in other aspects of life, but the confidence that the role brings is assisting them in

showing up in those domains too.

Four of the six participants shared how the experience of motherhood significantly

impacted their identity as a counsellor. They described the learning process of fostering their

children's emotions and allowing them to be exactly who they are in the world, a practice that

merged perfectly with the pieces surrounding their own permission to show up and just be.

Participants One and Three discussed experiences of growing up in smaller communities

and later living and working in those same communities. Participant Three embraced being seen

as a professional while always being remembered as a young person in their community:

> There's people here that knew me as a kid and a teenager, that's always just gonna be a
>
> part of your story, whether it's perfect or not…you can't really separate your identity in a
>
> small town because people know you.

Participant One reflected on working with a client that they had shared lived experiences with other members of their family as a child growing up. In their work together, Participant One initially struggled with aspects of self-disclosure that pertained to this shared family history, as well as, shared cultural history, but later found that in disclosure these shared aspects strengthened the therapeutic relationship.

Self-Compassion and Acceptance

In the final subtheme of Surrendering to Self, self-compassion and acceptance were vital aspects of the authentic development process experienced by all the participants, and over time were called upon repeatedly during new challenges and periods of growth. In experiencing self-compassion and acceptance, participants were able to embrace aspects of themselves that they had previously feared or rejected and welcomed phases of their development that were new and unfamiliar.

Reflecting on the acceptance that was shown to them by their supervisor, Participant One recalled that "it helped me to see myself in a kinder light and embrace all the messiness and know that at some point all of that is going to help me help other people." In dissolving their fears and letting go of expectations, Participant One arrived at a place where they were comfortable with the Self that was showing up in session and put trust in their spirituality, that the universe would also show up for them and guide them in right action.

Participants Two and Five described their experiences of self-compassion when faced with difficulty in the therapeutic relationship with clients. They described a self-reflection process that was free from shame and filled with curiosity as they explored what was occurring for them and how they could engage differently with themselves and with the client in order to better support the moment. Marking their increased self-acceptance was the recognition by

Participant Two of being a fallible human being and their acknowledgment of the beauty of

therapy being comprised of just two regular people. Participant Two also reflected with

compassion on fear as it shows up in their process now and described it as a means of keeping

them rooted to the personal and professional work:

> Sometimes I use it, I use it to my advantage...if I wasn't afraid of inadequacy maybe I'd
>
> be reckless, maybe I wouldn't be so careful with who I am in the room and how I serve
>
> people. It keeps me humble; it keeps me honest that fear. The danger of it is that it can
>
> overwhelm me. I just have to be careful, it's just this one thing that I really have to be
>
> careful with.

In accepting that fear is a part of their experience, Participant Two added:

> I know that it shows up in motherhood, it shows up in friendships, it shows up in work, it
>
> just is part of me, so instead of trying to fight against it I've learned to accept it as part of
>
> me and that I have strategies to work with it.

Participant Five shared that coming forward and accepting their own challenges with mental

health was a key factor in feeling more comfortable in the role of counsellor:

> What I really think it was, was the recognition, the space for my humanity and my own
>
> struggles with mental health and it was developing connections with clients and being
>
> able to see the common humanity with the people that I was working with…it was the
>
> connection that was serving people, and me showing up and being someone that people
>
> could feel safe with allowed me to unmask in a way that I hadn't been.

Furthermore, Participant Five noted that this "unmasking" process of opening themselves up and

working through their blind spots and past conditioning was how they transitioned from a place

of insecurity within themselves to one of safety and trust, "there's a confidence that I feel that

I'm worthy, that I have things to offer, that it's okay to make mistakes and that it's okay to be

human." Their process of surrendering involved them repeatedly going inward and asking the

question, "What is true and real for me?".

Similarly, Participant Three shared the acceptance they fostered for their mental health

journey, "I live with a lot of anxiety all the time and just had to recognize that's part of myself

that's never going away, and it is what it is and that's fine." In coming forward in their role of

counsellor, Participant Six reflected how they often notice the authentic Self being "siloed" to

specific areas in life or with specific people, but for them, their identity was starting to "fuse"

and they felt like themselves everywhere they went with no need for a protective façade.

Surrendering to Self through compassion and acceptance was a process in establishing self-trust

and participants expressed the realization that who they are at their core is enough.

Cultivating Capacity

Cultivating Capacity is the third theme created from the data and entails the marshalling

of personal resources to gradually increase one's inner awareness and guidance. This heightened

ability to be with the Self sets the foundation for the therapeutic exchange with clients and the

capacity to hold space for that which the client brings. Three subthemes comprise the larger

theme and include: attunement, the refined ability to discern one's sensory and emotional

messages and rhythm, testing the connection, which involves the courage and vulnerability to

experiment with one's personhood, and dynamic evolution, the active maturation process.

Attunement

Learning to listen to and discern the inner sensory and emotional processes that arose

during the participants' development as counsellors in training was a crucial aspect of arriving

closer to their authentic selves. Participants described the practices they engaged in as periods of

self-reflection, both outwardly supported and ventured on their own, and being undertaken across

the timeline of their training and careers. Contemplative practices included body-based

modalities like yoga and float therapy, journaling, reading, and personal therapy. Moreover,

participants described a shift that took place over time whereby they transitioned from a

cognitive, thought-based process, to an embodied heartfelt one.

As years of experience were gained, participants noted that this movement from head to

heart and body could happen in an instant and became instinctive. In getting curious and attuned

in session, Participant Two shared that:

> If something is really big and I feel overwhelmed by it, when I slow down and make it
>
> smaller I get really curious and then that feels like it's so invigorating because when
>
> you're afraid that you're inadequate or you're anxious that you suck, your curiosity
>
> is...you can't find it, and that's where I feel the most alive, is when I'm curious, like that
>
> for me, that's therapy, that feels so good!…I just love it! So, when something really big
>
> happens and I get the chance to find the curiosity, then I'm lit up again, and I know that
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> that feels like me, not just afraid, and it doesn't feel totally conscious anymore.

Participant Two stated that the antecedent to their curiosity is body-based, an experience that

sometimes feels like "being backed into a corner" with their heart pounding and feeling

constricted. Checking in and attending to the felt sense of their awareness and the messages that

their body is telling them meant they needed to physically shift their body in session and find

more comfort which simultaneously allowed them to reinvigorate their curiosity, both for what

was occurring within them and the therapeutic space. Engaging in the practices of journaling,

peer consultation, and supervision would help them to later find more answers to the questions

that their curiosity brought forward, as actively working to attune to themselves meant they were also practiced at facing their fears and asking for support.

Similarly, Participants Three and Five discussed their own body-based practices of attunement. As the circumstances around their childhood left much of their inner experience unexamined, the ability for Participant Three to attune to their inner landscape was fostered later in life through the assistance of personal therapy and supervision during their counselling training, "It was like having people hand-hold and walk you through that, like 'What's happening in your body right now?'" Without that formative basis to discern what sensations and emotions were arising in their body, and the messages that corresponded to them, Participant Three shared that nothing else could be built upon their counselling practice, nor would they have any idea of what it meant to be authentic. Moreover, had they continued as a counsellor and in life without the ability to safely listen to their body, any significant sensations that arose would have simply caused them to "tune out". Later in their practice, Participant Three noted how their experience of attunement shifted and became more about what they did not feel, that is, an absence of that sinking feeling that alerted them that something might be amiss.

For Participant Five, they spent most of their years in an up-regulated internal state, so for them, their practice of attunement meant learning to be quiet and still within in order to down-regulate their nervous system and find an "inner system of trust and surrender." The experiential nature of this type of soothing practice was different than the process of seeking external support or validation for comfort as it was about "removing distractions" from their life and "showing up" for themselves. While these practices were nurtured outside of the therapeutic space to start, Participant Five also utilized them appropriately with clients and explained their belief that when relating to others, one is always checking in with oneself. They described this practice of

attunement with the Self and client in a three-step process: 1. Remembering, 2. Noticing, and 3. Acknowledging. For them, remembering involves simply bringing awareness back to the moment, noticing involves checking in with the breath and the body (e.g., a gut feeling and/or diaphragmatic breathing), and acknowledging is giving space within and possibly utilizing the sensation and the message, if appropriate, in session. While giving credence to their internal state, Participant Five also cautions against getting lost in what the body is doing while working to discern if the sensations belong to them or if they are attuning to something that is occurring within the client.

Much like Participant Five, Participant Six shared how they spent time noticing their internal environment during sessions and would actively "hold on" to the feeling so they could reflect afterwards. They described sitting with the feeling and examining it, asking themselves questions about what they noticed within themselves and between them and their client. For Participant Six, it was during this period of practiced reflection that they started to arrive at terms such as congruence and the components that comprise it:

> It was kind of like I noticed it, grabbed on, and each time I grabbed on I could hold on a little longer and being able to actually really sit in that feeling, and now it's just like I don't want to let go, 'cause that's awesome, that shit's gold, right!

By being attuned to their own narrative framework, having enhanced their vocabulary and consulted with their trusted literary companions, Participant Four paid close attention to the words that comprised their clients' narratives. In doing so, they were able to discern the meaning that their clients attributed to their stories and hone in on the impact that it had on their lives.

Testing the Connection

With the participants garnering awareness around their authentic Selves, putting their practices, intuition, and instincts into motion with their clients was an active choice that came next. Taking these steps towards fully embracing their authenticity required courage, vulnerability, honesty, and transparency, aspects of their experience that were all still in flux, as being in relationship to themselves was evolving, so too were the therapeutic relationships they were building. Building trust and capacity within the Self also included seeking the continued support of supervisors for some participants.

Participant Five described using humor as a starting off point to test if it was safe for them to show up more fully themselves in session with a client:

> Coupled with my vulnerability, especially in the beginning, is humour…if I say a joke or if I make light of something, is that a space where we can connect, is that a space where we can kind of see each other? For some people it's not, and it's not that it's not okay, but I do think that's probably where I would put up some protection.

Should their use of humour not be welcomed yet in the relationship, Participant Five described how they work to stay engaged in the process, that their give and take of energy may be less as they feel the client is less willing to reciprocate, and in self-reflecting they asked "what is my ability to recover and then return to a place of safety, or would I allow that to disrupt the connection or prevent the connection from being made?" Should a disruption be perceived:

> There are times when I've felt the sensation that I should be pausing someone, or you know, not letting them go to a certain place, and if I don't check in on that, whether that's like a protective mechanism, then it can lead to me kind of missing the opportunity I guess and then whatever is happening in me I might just shut it down.

Shutting down the opportunity to connect to themselves, rather than acknowledging their inner experience, caused them to get "stuck", a feeling shared by other participants and expanded upon by Participant Two.

Participant Two comparably expressed testing out their attunement and connection and reflected on times when they hesitated to engage with it. For them, being able to act in the moment required timing, grounding, and available energy; without those vital components they have found themselves at times withdrawing, being less present, and feeling drained. From those experiences, Participant Two noted how they would then circle back through their process of reconnecting to the Self which meant offering compassion, enlisting the support and collaboration of peers, mentors, or other health professionals, or perhaps embarking on new knowledge acquisition. In a period where they may feel less connected to themselves, or perhaps fear of inadequacy had found its way back into their thought process, Participant Two finds comfort in the connections they have previously formed, stating "there's never been a time when debriefing was a bad idea for me." The reminder from others in the counselling arena that what they were experiencing was normal, that it was going to be okay, and that not all sessions can feel seamless and connected was enough of a reminder for Participant Two to be able to reconnect with themselves and reinvigorate their next session. Additionally, they reminded themselves of the evidence (e.g., returning clients) that supported their efforts in showing up, and that although their personal work to reclaim their authenticity often meant being unabashed in their interactions, their professional presentation required more care, a bit of "editing" to keep the focus on the client whilst still being honest with their use of Self.

Using that same spiritedness found by checking in with themselves or seeking the advice of trusted mentors, Participant Six also tested their connection to their clients by bringing aspects

of themselves forward in session that their clients were specifically asking for. Over time, by

listening to their clients and experimenting with aspects of themselves that they felt they

authentically possessed, Participant Six was able to let go of the need for theory driven

interactions and show up in the therapeutic space as themselves, regardless of prompting. In

testing the connection, Participant Six stated:

> I'd witness them almost like hear me out, or tolerate it, or give me the benefit of the doubt
>
> when I was off. So, what was that then? They're not slamming the door in my
>
> face…they're still here, so why are they still here?...And that's when it started to really
>
> dawn on me, well, I'm the only other person in the room, so when am I really noticing
>
> them flowing with me, when do I notice that symbioses that happens between me and my
>
> client, and it's when I would show up, not my theory.

From there, and within context, Participant Six decided it best to "throw out" their old notions

and continue testing out other ways of being with clients that invited more of their true nature

into the relationship.

Participant Three, much like Participant Six, sensed what their clients needed, and even

during times of client tension would bring aspects of themselves forward that helped foster

greater connection when perhaps there was a chance that one might not be forged. Using self-

disclosure with honesty and transparency (e.g., challenges in parenting) to assist the client in an

appropriate and relevant manner, anxieties were alleviated, and further ground was gained.

Contrasting the other participants, attuning to and testing the connection within the

supervisor/supervisee dynamic did not lead to a greater sense of safety or trust for Participant

Four. In fact, for Participant Four the supervisory relationship did not provide the framework or

foundation of congruence that other participants experienced but rather conveyed the message

that their work needed to be transactional, and results based, which was not in alignment with how they viewed their work; therefore, the evolution of their authentic identity development was held private. Attuning to their clients and forming connections within the relationship included finding the shared understanding of meaning, and in doing so, created trust so that further exploration and revision could be undertaken:

> They see that I have entered their understanding, their context, and therefore they consider what I have to say to be meaningful. I think they see me not as a person manipulating techniques, but as authentic. I am meeting them, who I am, and that I think is, well, that's the art of counselling. That gives them trust right away.

Although the moments that they experienced congruence within themselves and made authentic connections with their clients was described as "profound", Participant Four also defined their counselling career as "lonely".

Dynamic Evolution

While the ability to be with the Self evolved over time in a natural way, such as with age and experience, in this final subtheme of cultivating capacity participants also expressed that their active participation in the process was required. Participants described an ebb and flow to the conscious process of inviting their authentic Selves forward, that although it could be easy at times, it was also fraught with fear and uncertainty during new challenges in work and in life.

At the time of the interview, Participant Six found themselves at this new phase of uncertainty and shared:

> I think it's a new journey that I've been embarking on, that I'm still trying to kind of figure out. I think I've had a few changes in my life that have created a space where I feel like I've lost touch with that genuine Self because I'm not certain in her anymore.

They acknowledged the re-occurring pressure to perform in this later stage of their career, the thought of needing to do something or rely once again on theory. They reminded themselves that they've been through other challenges before, that retreating to a cognitive place diminished their experience and that the way forward was in connection and communication, both within themselves and with trusted others. For them, from early childhood onward, it had always been safe to arrive in the world as themselves, but this new phase of development was unfamiliar and filled with anxiety. Participant Six added:

> This wasn't a linear process in any way shape or form…the interesting piece of it all is that I think that while we always think we'll always have it once we've got it, that's not true. I think situations come up and we have to reassess how we get back at it because I don't know, we change, we evolve, our authentic Selves evolve, and it's not just some static thing, it's more dynamic than that.

Participant Two similarly shared that the evolution of their identity and practice would need to undergo more growth in order to feel the same confidence in other modalities of counselling as they do with one-on-one counselling. They expressed enlisting the same practices that they had engaged in during their developmental process thus far, such as seeking supervision, and working through the doubts that would surely arise during a new venture. Embracing the beginner's journey again and being a novice was reflected upon as challenging:

> I have a hard time giving myself the patience to not be awesome all the time, right away. I hate that. I hate it. I see other therapists that do it so well and I want to be there right now! But I have to be patient and trust that it's gonna be, I'm gonna get there, it's just gonna take some time and support.

Participant Two acknowledged that their evolution has brought about more awareness for their areas in need of growth, that although it can feel easier at times to address, the lingering sensation of fear may never fully go away.

The lifelong maturation of identity and practice was embraced by Participant Three as they felt that the duty of a counsellor was never done, that is, that their learning would never be complete:

> You could be a counsellor for 40 years and I think you're still gonna be like, "Whoa! I never thought about this", or "I used to do it this way and now I realize that totally isn't working for me anymore and I'm gonna do a totally different thing."

For them, allowing the process to unfold naturally over time, while offering compassion and grace was the approach that suited them best. They expressed that while exploring one's identity and practice requires work, no one will ever all the answers at once. Furthermore, they stressed the importance of the self-reflective work of personal therapy as being paramount to their evolutionary process and to that of other counsellors, taking the stance that if one cannot do the work themselves, they certainly cannot walk their clients through the depths of theirs.

As Participant Four neared their retirement, the evolution of their practice was concluding, but the evolution of their authentic Self was still in process. They found the work "very fulfilling" but expressed a concern that they were aging out of the profession and would no longer be viewed as having a desirable opinion from younger clients. Participant Four deemed themselves to be having "transition issues" as they brought their career to a close. After experiencing some of their closest moments with clients they reflected, "They're the ones I retain right, and I'll miss that, confronting the world of another person, walking into it and you could just see it…it's an odd feeling, and I'll miss having that."

Collectively, the participants described how their processes shifted across the lifespan of their careers from being a conscious practice to an unconscious one, and sometimes reciprocally returning to conscious reflection again in times of strain or novelty. Along the journey, their ability to arrive as themselves in whatever space they took up had become evermore their way of being in the world, not always requiring methods, practices, or consultation to elicit their true Selves forward, but unfolding naturally. Yet, in light of this evolution and maturation, participants also collectively shared the sometimes-fleeting nature of the authentic Self, the humanness of getting lost or stuck in their own processes and being unsure of how to reconnect and advance their identity and practice. Nevertheless, for these participants, cultivating the capacity to fully engage as one's authentic Self meant taking the stance of a learner as they embraced the unending work of self-reflection, while letting go of old ways of being along the way.

Aligning with Authenticity

The final theme created from the data is Aligning with Authenticity. In this phase of identity development participants described their sense of Self as being free from fear and pretense and being deeply attuned to their inner knowing. From this depth of understanding, participants shared the intense connection they felt to themselves, and to their clients, and the impact that makes on their lives and practice. The subthemes of this category are presence, which encompasses the felt experience of being congruent in one's authentic nature, and the ripple effect, which involves the proliferation of the experience.

Presence

Having done the groundwork of dissolving fear and surrendering to their inner knowing, participants diligently built their foundational capacity and arrived at the experience of their

authentic Selves. Constructed on the underpinnings of trust and safety, and therefore abolishing

the need for protective façades, connection and presence co-exist with authenticity. Few words

are neither needed, nor able to describe the magnitude of the experience; nonetheless,

participants consistently recounted the embodied awareness they possessed when experiencing

their authentic Selves, having reached a place of presence that feels both calm and invigorating,

and wholly integrated.

Participant One described being in their authentic presence as feeling easeful and

enlivening, sharing that moments where they are deeply connected with themselves and their

clients as being palpably different, "It's the ease in the room, and it's strangely energizing, even

though it's sometimes really tough work, like afterwards I'm like, 'Woohoo! This is fun!', so

then I know I've shown up." They identified those moments as an opportunity to listen with their

whole being, an experience where everything is online and alert, and they are guided by the

universe to assist their clients. Being guided by this presence is a "felt through" phenomenon for

them, which is different than attempting to enter into session with a "thought through" agenda,

because for them, having too rigid a plan means steering the client rather than following the

client's lead. Although these experiences are invigorating, Participant One struggled to elucidate

or define their experience in broader terms:

> I don't know how to explain it any different or articulate it any different. It's just a feeling
>
> that you're in there and connected and it's just the two of you in the moment in the world.
>
> Right? I just don't know how else to say that, like it's just, you have that, "Yep, it's here."

While those "it's here" moments come and go, and sometimes sessions and days are more

draining than others, Participant Two shared the invigorating feeling of Participant One when

authentic connection arrives, stating, "You feel this is exactly what I'm supposed to be doing in this moment in time and it feels electric and it feels awesome." Participant Four similarly noted:

> You get a look in the eye from your client, of recognition that you hit the point…there would be a point where I feel I've entered that world of that person, I know I've entered that world, and therefore your communication is more deep and more meaningful.

They deem these moments as "peak experiences", akin only to their rare and vivid experiences in nature and noted how profound it was for them to realize that it was even possible to experience such a feeling in the counselling room. Regardless of being so adept at the use of language, Participant Four explained the overwhelming awe that a narrative hardly does justice to:

> You could describe it as much as you want, but words fail you to describe the feeling because it's an intellectual, emotional, physical, and if you're spiritually inclined, spiritual experience, where all four layers are in columnar formation, and they all agree. Your body is celebrating that victory.

They continued that the presence could be felt by the client as well, that they would recognize them having the same connected experience, free of pretense, yet it did not require calling attention to, "You're not trying to protect yourself, you're not trying to, you know, show professionalism. You're not trying, you just are."

> Participant Five described their felt presence as freedom:
>
> I feel free to say what I have to say, to feel what I feel, without fear. There's a lightness, and the way that I speak I can slow down and there's more space. I feel comfortable in my body. I feel more grounded.

Like Participant One, who shared that in their authentic presence they feel as though they are transmuting information through them from a higher source to the client, Participant Five shared

a sense of information "arising" within them, that they are no longer "grabbing" at thoughts from their head when aligned with their authentic Self.

The use of descriptors such as "flow" and "fluid" were used by many of the participants to describe how it feels to be authentically present. In noticing their presence, Participant Three stated, "I'm not really in my head or my body as much, it's a lot more like flow, it's like 'Okay, yeah, this feels good, we're doing what needs to be done." Much like Participants Two and Three, who shared that when they are not in their authenticity they feel a physical pressure and a gut sensation that something is off, Participant Six also feels a similar ease and flow when they are authentically themselves, "I can feel it; it's like a calm, peaceful, stable, fluid, congruent space." As with many of the other participants, there is also room for lightness and humour, and Participant Six laughed when reflecting on how they are completely themselves and accepted in their workspace, "Like I could crab crawl out of my office and be like, 'Check it out! There she is!'"

In presence, there is awareness held by the counsellor that allows them to simultaneously attune to a deeper level of connection both within themselves and their clients. In this space, there is transparency between counterparts, and a true experience of honesty and vulnerability emerges, while constantly monitoring and respecting the boundaries of the relationship. All the conditions of the human experience are welcome and invited.

In authentic presence there is now capacity to observe, to witness that which is unfolding. Without blinding fear and doubt, participants shared what they saw within their clients and the impact that their bond was having. Many of the participants discussed the release and relief that their clients unburdened thanks to the safety and trust that had been established within the

relationship, the prelude to that being the safety and trust established within the counsellors themselves. Participant One shared:

> They start weeping because you've said a truth out loud that they've never allowed themselves to say and they're very raw and vulnerable in that moment as they're just you know letting all of that move through them and I think you have to feel safe to allow that to move through you in such a vulnerable way, and so you know, just sitting with them… then afterwards you know they feel, well, they're exhausted, but there's such a sense of relief and such a sense of being held, and some people have never been held before in such a safe place, so, you know I feel honoured to be able to provide that for them.

Participant Three witnesses their clients relax into the moment, settle into comfort, and subsequently become more open with things they would likely not have brought forward had they remained fearful, angry, rigid, or protected. Like Participants One and Three, Participant Five described seeing their clients' ease into themselves and their experience, thus letting go of the protective façade:

> I see them crying out of recognition and realization that they deserve to be loved and supported, that they're worthy, that so much of the things they've held on to were not theirs in the first place. I can see it in their bodies when all of a sudden they sit in a way that's more comfortable to them and the tension leaves their body. I see it when they close their eyes or when they tear up and go quiet, or when they get up to leave and there's just this big sigh.

In this letting go, there is possibility for the resurgence of hope, both for the counsellor and the client. Participant Five shares that they also feel a sense of pride, gratitude, and awe for all the

work that their clients are doing and for everyone that is showing up and doing the vulnerable

work of aligning with their authenticity.

Participant Two witnesses fear in their clients, that same "nasty" voice of inadequacy they

know well and have worked to ease:

> I see her in almost every single client I have. So, there's this knowing that I have when
>
> they talk about it…that's honesty, that's authentic, that's like 'I get that' and I know how
>
> to use it for good and help people be okay for having it. So, I mean, what else are we
>
> supposed to be doing in that room, you know, that's it.

The Ripple Effect

In the concluding subtheme of Aligning with Authenticity, participants shared how

everyday strangers, friends, family, colleagues, mentors, supervisors, and clients all possess the

ability to empower them to live and practice from an authentic and truthful place, purely by

being courageous enough to model it first. Simply put, the ripple effect is that authenticity breeds

authenticity.

For Participant One, seeing the change in their clients over time continued to bring about

more confidence within themselves, further solidifying that the way they were showing up, the

enough-ness that they now possessed for their role as counsellor, was having an effect. They

recognized their client reciprocally recognizing them as being a relatable human in the world,

someone who has been through challenging experiences and made it to the other side of them.

Participant One seizes those opportunities to model their success by being appropriately

transparent and honest with their own trials and supporting their clients along the journey to the

place where they too believe that they are going to be okay.

Participant Two described how they felt validated during supervision or peer consultation when their counterpart shared their own struggles, stating it was like a "refuel and refresh" that bolstered the hard work that they were doing in being vulnerable themselves and supporting their clients to do the same. They identified this as the same common humanity and freedom that is created for their clients to take up space in the therapeutic relationship when they as the counsellor have cared for themselves and arrived in their authentic presence. In being steady, the focus is on the client, a rare experience for many, Participant Two believes, and they remain connected and supported in that focus.

The ripple effect of authenticity touches back on permission for Participant Three, and on conveying an opportunity to demonstrate one's best, rather than perpetuate the illusion of perfection:

I think when you show up and try to pretend to be perfect or try to be something you're not, it's basically like saying to them [clients], 'You should only show me either your best self, or maybe like a little bit of your tough self, but I really don't want you to get messy and dirty and dig in to it'…when you show up in a real way it gives other people permission to show up in a real way and that's in life, and that's at work, and that's in parenting, and it's with your parenting friends and your partner. Like the more vulnerable you can be, it is, I think, giving people permission to show up in the same way.

Participant Three continued that to truly do the deep personal and professional work it is going to get messy and painful, but it will also be beautiful.

Because of their internal work of getting quiet, Participant Five was able to be present in the therapeutic space and stated that it was a "snowball effect", that being open to connecting with themselves allowed them to be more open and connect with others. For them, the ripple

effect of authenticity started with colleagues and supervisors who were demonstrating their own

vulnerability and realness in the workplace; later, anyone and everyone who showed up

authentically in life influenced Participant Five. Acknowledging this impact, Participant Five

stated:

> I feel the most love and unconditional positive regard for myself than I ever have in my
>
> life, and I know that translates outwards, I've seen it, and people have told me. It's all
>
> I've ever wanted and it's all I really want for people, to feel safe and loved. It's taken me
>
> doing the work for myself and continuously doing the work for myself to develop those
>
> things.

Much like the take-it-or-leave-it motto that Participant Three first witnessed in their

partner, the radical acceptance that the participants bolstered within themselves gave them the

confidence to arrive in the moment and be of use to their clients without expectation. Participant

Six summarized the effect this had on clients:

> In allowing this to be true, this like, you don't need to fit, you don't need to do anything,
>
> it actually alleviated a lot of pressure for my clients because then they could just show up,
>
> because there was no expectation of whether you showed up with your defenses, without
>
> your defenses, with your little quirks, or with your authentic Self, right? So, it's almost
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> like it helped allow, almost like it normalized the idea of people just being fucking people
>
> and being human.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the information shared through participant interviews in order to

answer the question, what are the experiences of counsellors in understanding and developing

their authentic Selves in the therapeutic relationship? From the interviews, four themes were

created and further delineated by subthemes. Theme one, Dissolving Fear, described the outset of the participants' journeys and the returning point from which to start again during new challenges; subthemes included effort to ease, connection and collaboration, and the permission slip. Theme two, Surrendering to Self, involved the recognition and trust of one's innate abilities and inner knowing; subthemes included the identified Self, intersection of identity, and self-compassion and acceptance. Theme three, Cultivating Capacity, elucidated the progression of efforts to increase personal awareness and advance one's ability to hold therapeutic space; attunement, testing the connection, and dynamic evolution further defined the theme. Finally, theme four, Aligning with Authenticity, detailed the embodied accounts of participants arriving in the moment as their full Selves, free of fear and pretense; subthemes included presence, and the ripple effect.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In this final chapter, findings from the research will be further discussed and situated within the body of existing literature for comparison. Other sections will detail limitations of the research, expand on possible areas of future research, explain knowledge mobilization, and conclude with a summary of my experience as the researcher.

In the present study, it was made apparent by the participants that the journey of authentic self-discovery is a lifelong and layered process. The entirety of understanding revolved around the ongoing practice of self-reflection. Also evident was the interconnectedness of the process, that the people and practices the participants seek out along the way become interwoven into their identity and thus intrinsically become a part of how the participants identify and explain their authentic Selves. This is evident in the resultant themes of the research, that albeit distinct and comprehensive on their own, are so fundamentally linked that discussing one invariably involves the others. Expressed by the participants were experiences of strain and self-doubt, innate abilities and fortitude, togetherness and humanity, grace and refinement, trust and surrender, and awe and reciprocity. Such is the very nature of this study, to discuss oneself you must consider all the aspects that comprise you, noting where certain experiences demarcate the periods in your life and how that shapes you moving forward. As the participants made clear, identity is not static, it is dynamic, and evolves in co-existence with everything and everyone. Thus, authenticity ebbs and flows, it feels both fleeting and stable, requiring effort to ascertain, but also simply arising.

The first theme, Dissolving Fear, shone light into the dark corners of the participants' experiences in the early days of their identity development as counsellors, a time when they were filled with uncertainty about what they were capable of and just how much of themselves to let

be known. This theme also served as a placeholder, a returning point as new challenges in life and practice brought forth concerns and a resurgence of fear or distress. Therefore, it is clear from these participant accounts that continuously circling back on the process of self-discovery is required to further promote awareness and dislodge oneself from the natural overwhelm that ensues at the beginning of training or a new life challenge. Participants were unassuming in their descriptions of these moments in their developmental journey, that is, they were humble enough to declare their willingness to learn more about themselves and about the therapeutic process. By facing their vulnerabilities, through naming them and getting acquainted with their presence and purpose they became familiar thus unencumbered; therefore, when next they surfaced in their awareness it was less worrisome as the participants now had skills to work with their distress and more capacity to be with those parts. Such integration is necessary to achieve greater levels of authenticity within counselling (Kern, 2014).

In Dissolving Fear, subthemes delineated the process by which participants worked to soften their fears and how they were supported along the way. The subtheme of effort to ease showed how the process of becoming familiar with fear was at first effortful, how it was daunting to look at oneself with open eyes and begin to peel back the layers of protection that had been built to cover one's vulnerability (Swaby, 2020). Through connection and collaboration, it was the allyship of peers, friends, family, and mentors that helped the participants address their fears over time and shed expectations of themselves that stood in the way of their growth and the identity they could feel emerging. It was in relationship to safe others that the participants began to situate the common humanity of their experience and realize that they were not alone in this journey; this was also true regardless of power differentials so long as the other was also exuding authenticity and vulnerability (Barton, 2019; Yang,

Jankauskaite, Gerstenblith et al., 2022). The support and modelling that was demonstrated within these relationships allowed the participants to act with courage and grant themselves permission to show up in their lives and in their practice more completely.

With the permission that was offered both by trusted others and by the participants themselves, they learned first that it was possible and second that they already possessed the ability to release previously held expectations for how they "should" be, both personally and professionally. This dispels the notion that counsellors need be immune to the vulnerabilities of the human condition or that they ought not to possess any lasting effects of trauma or wounding (Kern, 2014); furthermore, rejecting one's vulnerability could lead to greater disconnection from the Self. Embracing one's "messy" history, as some of the participants discussed, allowed them to reframe their past experiences as strength building and view themselves in a kinder, more compassionate light (Kern, 2014). This allowed the participants to start seeing themselves as competent counsellors, and the act of compassion continued to serve as a buffer against later psychological unrest during challenges such as the resurgence of fear in any of their assumed roles (Neff, 2003). Additionally, they were able to consolidate what felt appropriate for them in the therapeutic relationship and encounter versus what may be expected of them from external sources, such as institutional or agency needs (Yang, Jankauskaite, Gerstenblith et al., 2022). Reconciling an authentic Self with what once may have been thought of as a more professional self was a profound realization for many of the participants and was largely the greatest catalyst for their proceeding developmental journey (Bray, 2019). No longer requiring a protective façade, participants were able to invite their true nature forward, and for some, this was a first in their lives. For every participant, dissolving fear and allowing themselves to take up space in the world and in their practice was a continuous choice that endured throughout their development.

In softening self-doubt, insecurity, and expectations, participants were able to begin familiarizing themselves with parts of their identity that had been hidden or unacknowledged. The second theme of Surrendering to Self thus involved the emergence of inner knowing and intuition. Beginning to follow their own voice and guidance further assisted the participants in their development of innate skills and abilities by granting them autonomy in their work and in their relationships (Yang, Jankauskaite, Gerstenblith et al., 2022) Allowing one's authentic Self to be known and brought forward in the world required the participants to address all the roles that they play in their lives, be that parenthood or partnership, as a counsellor or client, a colleague or a friend, and how their authentic Selves impacted those relationships. For many of the participants, showing up authentically in their role as counsellor was not something that could be held separate from who they were in the rest of their lives, although some participants did try in the beginning of their journey to separate their personal and professional identities. It was realized by all that what had begun in one facet of their life, quickly spread into others and became an intentional practice to become congruent in all aspects. For some, their gained confidence in one area helped them foster more confidence in other roles (Yang, Jankauskaite, Gerstenblith et al., 2022). Surrendering to Self also required acceptance and self-compassion which was fostered through self-reflection and continued to be a practice that occurred in connection with others. Acceptance from clients further encouraged the participants' developmental process as they learned that it was their use of Self rather than theory or tools that was having the most significant impact on the relationship (Kaimaxi & Lakioti, 2021). Paramount to the dissolution of old fears was the experience of a shared struggle in the counselling profession amongst supervisors, peers and colleagues and in acknowledging the

common humanity for all that ails the human condition (Barton, 2019; Kaimaxi & Lakioti, 2021).

Cultivating Capacity, the third theme created from the data, detailed the growth and refinement process that the participants engaged in to hold space for their own experience and that of their clients. The attunement process involved getting curious about their inner experiences, that is the messages that their nervous system and bodies were conveying. Participants engaged in contemplative practices that included body-based modalities like yoga and float therapy, journaling, reading, and personal therapy. These practices allowed the participants to get quiet, to be still with their inner awareness, and begin to listen on a deeper level to the messages and resultant actions they felt naturally arising. These practices also fit within the lens of self-care, which is also vital in the identity development and maintenance of a counsellor (Kern, 2014; Barton, 2019).

In cultivating awareness, participants described the shift that took place across time whereby they transitioned from a cognitive, thought-based process, to an embodied heartfelt one. Gaining experience with this deeper listening, participants described how the process became instinctual. Enacting the messages that the deeper listening gleaned, participants began to test the connection in the therapeutic relationship. For some, this meant trying on new ways of being, such as using humour with their clients to see if they would be well received in showing up with more of their authentic Selves (Kaimaxi & Lakioti, 2021). Testing the connection in this way serves as a rehearsal for one's emerging authentic Self, a means of gauging safety and fit which has been shown to be a helpful practice for beginning counsellors (Bray, 2021). Some participants admitted that not everyone would welcome these aspects and acknowledged that it would take effort to continue to show up authentically, rather than put up a protective front.

Other participants acknowledged their recognition of clients giving them the benefit of the doubt, which made them realize that what mattered was their true selves in the therapeutic relationship, not any measure of theory or expertise. This demonstrates that clients are equal counterparts in the therapeutic relationship and active agents of change (Grafanaki & McLeod, 2002).

Consistently, the act of cultivating capacity occurred across the lifespan and career of the participants. They described their maturation process as naturally occurring, that years of experience both in life and in counselling practice helped them evolve and become more comfortable, but that it also required active choice to continuously engage in the learning process. Some participants acknowledged that they may never be entirely free from the insecurities that had plagued them since the beginning of their training; nevertheless, becoming familiar with their fears made it easier for everything to co-exist. Change could yield distance and disconnection from the authentic Self, but further growth and evolution could reconnect them.

The final theme, Aligning with Authenticity, described the embodied experiences of the participants when they arrive in the present moment as their full selves and armed with the awareness that who they are at their core is enough. From this place of truth, they experienced the awe of the here-and-now encounter both with themselves and in relation to their clients. Some participants shared that there was no need to call attention to the experience, that the profundity of its existence was enough to bear witness to without the need for words to explain it, nor could they do justice even if carefully chosen. Moreover, the mutuality of the experience was so palpable that it could be seen in the eyes and the body language of their clients. Participants witnessed their clients relax into the moment, release painful emotions, and share of themselves in brave and vulnerable ways, thus increasing the relational depth of the therapeutic

encounter (Ray et al., 2021). Participants consistently described their authentic presence as a felt sense of being safely aware of their body, akin to a flow state, and for some, the messages, actions, or words needed to support the moment seemed to arise from somewhere deep within them or come from somewhere outside of them, a higher source, rather than from a place of thinking or doing. As one participant put it, "You aren't trying, you just are." In this heightened place of awareness, participants were able to witness their client's experiences more intently, for they had freed themselves of the noise of their own lives. In arriving in authentic presence, the participants were able to model courage, vulnerability, and new ways of being for their clients. This modelling serves as a means of normalizing vulnerability and the courage it takes to grow in to oneself; this then creates greater transparency in any relationship and a ripple effect that can be felt by those involved (Kern, 2014; Yang, Jankauskaite, Gerstenblith et al., 2022).The trust and safety that had been experienced by the participants in countless ways along their journey was now embodied by them, and from here, became the next extension of authenticity as they invited their clients to step into their own inner knowing, shed their burdens and masks, and trust that who they are is enough.

Existing Literature

The literature is still evolving in its understanding of authentic counsellor identity formation. Emerging research demonstrates the significance and means by which counsellors can begin discerning and utilizing their congruent Selves. As expressed by some participants in the current study, research highlights the early developmental experiences modelled by one's family of origin as the foundational basis for what it means to be authentic. This underscores one's predisposition for life's later challenges in myriad roles and whether the gamble to be authentic in each context will be risked. Existing literature reveals that it can be especially challenging

when positions of privilege, power dynamics, and institutional expectations are present, as was experienced by some of the participants in the present study (Swaby, 2020; Yang, Jankauskaite, Gerstenblith et al., 2022). It is widely accepted then that the congruent development of a counsellor is a lifelong process with pivotal moments occurring in all relationships and practices. In reconciling these challenges, research also demonstrates that creative contemplative practices and supportive relationships that nurture vulnerability through reframing rather than pathologizing can be a vital step towards achieving integration and congruence for the counsellor (Auxier et al., 2003; Kern, 2021; Yang, Jankauskaite, Gerstenblith et al., 2022). According to Kennedy and Moore (2020), advanced specialized training yields an increase in self-awareness and capacity to attend to the client.

Research by Kaimaxi and Lakioti (2021) bolster the findings from the present study in that allowing one's authentic Self to emerge later in life often begins as a conscious exercise but gradually integrates into a way of being and worldview that is developed through trial and error and by being in constant connection with the whole Self. As Barton (2019) states, for many counsellors entering the field, and for years into their training and practice, there seems to be little discussion and understanding surrounding congruence and the further growth and maintenance of their authentic Self through self-care. The present study highlights the significant role that supervision played in the lives of many of the participants and how those supportive relationships served as a means of professional and personal self-care, something that is not always reflected in the literature (Barton, 2019). These relationships were a place for many of the participants to enhance their attunement abilities, a crucial embodied understanding of the human experience and the therapeutic exchange. Once accurate attunement towards the Self has been established it can be further regarded as a "kinesthetic and emotional sensing of others, knowing

their rhythm, affect and experience by metaphorically being in their skin" (Erksine, 1998, para. 7). This interconnectedness advances the empathy felt by all parties and deepens the therapeutic process and relationship. It is imperative that counsellors build their capacity for attuning to their inner world so they can also successfully navigate work-life balance and boundaries, which is essential to mitigating such things as burnout and compassion fatigue (Barton, 2019).

Findings from the present study correspond well with the existing literature, even reflecting many similar themes from other qualitative studies (Barton, 2019; Kaimaxi & Lakioti, 2021). In adopting a stance and practice of self-compassion and acceptance, counsellors can experience common humanity for themselves as individuals and as practitioners working in a challenging field (Barton, 2019). It can then be said that those who risk exploring and exposing their vulnerabilities in a safe and trusting environment are the most courageous as they risk the greatest potential for emotional injury—rejection (Schmid, 2005). At the risk of rejection, people have long adopted protective façades or masks to hide their authentic Selves and survive the trials of life with some semblance of safety. This has resulted in feelings of incongruence and isolation for the developing counsellor, and as Kern (2014) demonstrated, this has been especially true in the context of hiding one's perceived weaknesses, such as their own struggles with mental health or trauma which was also reflected in the present study. Without practices or experiences that bring the whole experience of the counsellor into a safe frame of view, the counsellor may sense that their authentic experience is not welcome in certain environments and are then left in isolation. So too would the client be left to sit in their own vulnerability and traumatic experiences, as the counsellor would not be able to adequately hold safe space, being consumed by their own unresolved wounds (Sherwood, 2001). Such is the view that those described as "wounded healers" often model the very bridge necessary to walk from incongruent

to congruent, having successfully integrated many aspects of a tumultuous journey (Remen et al., 1985). Authenticity can be seen as the process by which one balances their individuality and interrelatedness, forever evolving in relationship (Schmid, 2004).

Limitations of the Research

Several limitations exist within the present study. While the nature of the topic was positive, it required vulnerability on the part of the participants to share aspects of their story that oftentimes involved fear, self-doubt, and strain. It was evident in their honesty and candor that each participant was willing to share their experience, yet still aware of how the details were being perceived. This was apparent in the pacing of the interviews, in the careful word choice by some of the participants, and the consistent sigh of relief when the recording stopped. Unfailingly, each participant revealed slightly more about themselves and their process of identity development once the interview had ended. Research of this nature highlights that we can never fully know the experiences of another as there will always be limits to language and aspects of the Self withheld, or yet uncovered. The simple act of participating in the present study yielded new insight for the participants. Everything about the participants' authentic identity experience was still in motion; therefore, the essence of their stories that were captured at the time of the interview would likely look different if recaptured again today. However, this again emphasizes the evolving spirit of the topic, authentic identity development through reflection and experience.

Another limitation is that all the participants completed their counselling training at the same institution. While there were vast differences in their educational experiences, it can be said that there was enough similarity to their training that could account for the ways in which their introduction to reflexivity and contemplative practices shaped their developmental process. For

some of the participants, it was the very involvement of teachers, supervisors, and peers that helped shape their authentic identity. However, while there were similarities to the participants' accounts of self-discovery, each took their own unique time and path, and called upon resources within themselves and others in varying ways.

With respect to the homogeneity of the group, there is potential for scrutiny towards the sociocultural implications of what it means to develop and be authentic in the world as a human and a counsellor. It must be acknowledged that marginalized and racialized peoples may not be afforded the same sense of privilege as non-marginalized or racialized peoples when it comes to engaging in the world as their full selves. This may be especially true when such engagement is experienced as uncomfortable or threatening for these individuals should their expression of authenticity be viewed as a deviation from the cultural hegemony. Nonetheless, in the present study, the participants were a largely homogenous group, yet all participants can be viewed as having some form of diversity, be it racial, cultural, neurodevelopmental, socioeconomic, sex, age, etc., and some participants acknowledged these aspects of their identity and the impact it made on their authentic development.

Given that the researcher trained at the same institution as the participants, there were some pre-existing relationships with a few of the participants. This was carefully navigated through informed consent and the caveat that participants were to share only that which they were comfortable with. It was made clear to the participants that although there is a tendency to divulge more because of a pre-existing connection, that is, a possible participant bias towards pleasing the researcher, they were encouraged only to share as much information about themselves as necessary. Furthermore, as a researcher with counselling experience, I am interconnected in the process, and must acknowledge potential researcher influence (Ponterotto,

2005). Through keeping a reflexive journal and being forthcoming about my role in the socially constructed nature of the research I feel any significant concerns were mitigated; furthermore, I feel my ability to ask clarifying questions supported the interview process.

Future Research

Given that the current study is widely retrospective in nature, it would be fascinating to gain further insight into the subjective experiences of counsellors prospectively. Getting to expand on the insights and changes with a consistent cohort could further illuminate the developmental experience of counsellors. Future research could also expand with more specificity on the contemplative practices mentioned by the participants or explore the attunement process in more detail using body-based psychotherapeutic approaches such as Sensorimotor Psychotherapy or Somatic Experiencing. Research on the impact of attunement through such practices as yoga or meditation could also be beneficial as these have long been understood to cultivate inner awareness and assist the nervous system; the impact of a joint practice between counsellor and client and the potential influence it could have on the therapeutic relationship may also be of interest. Expanding the research on authentic counsellor identity formation could continue exploring how differing perspectives on what it means to be authentic impacts the counsellor, client and therapeutic relationship and how different demographic characteristics and regions intersect with the identity development process.

Implications for Practice

Rogers' 1957 necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic change remain relevant and stable in today's counselling and psychotherapy climate (Bayliss-Conway et al., 2021). There is an elegance to his person-centred view of healing, a style that warrants reminding amongst all practitioners. It is imperative then that we focus on these conditions and other

positive aspects of congruent development when fostering a healthy and balanced training of our counselling professionals so that they are equipped to support the increasing demand for therapy. Educators and supervisors must be mindful of the counsellor's development and with their comfort in authenticity. In a field where the personal is professional, should counsellors feel pathologized for their experiences there is great concern that they may further suffer when trying to integrate their authentic Selves along their developmental journey. Consequently, failing to embrace and share our vulnerabilities as human beings only perpetuates the stigma that counsellors must have it all together or that only their best selves are welcome (Kern, 2014).

As the work of a counsellor is deeply emotional, it is imperative that they build a comprehensive personal and professional network of people and practices that supports them in their day-to-day journey. Through this the therapist is equipped with the necessary resources to strengthen their resilience and continue embracing the depths of their own experience and others (Barton, 2019; Siegel, 2010). From here the focus can remain on the client and will be felt as a being with rather than a doing to. Counsellors who bring themselves fully to the therapeutic relationship essentially define the space that permits the "safe disclosure of otherwise unspoken issues" (Bray, 2019, p. 129). In the absence of an integrated and authentic identity, the human connection faulters and the therapeutic relationship suffers; both counsellor and client disconnect from themselves, each other, and the world (Sherwood, 2001). Clients can feel the authentic nature of their counsellors, of their genuine human care and compassion, and oftentimes it is simply their presence in the room that brings relief to their pain and hope to their sorrow. Likewise, counsellors can feel the positive regard their clients have for them and in their belief that the work they are undertaking together is good. Therefore, in the reciprocal nature of authenticity there is renewal.

Knowledge Mobilization

Findings from this research will be shared in various ways. Firstly, the complete study will be added to the UNBC Thesis collection and the Theses Canada database hosted by Library and Archives Canada. This will ensure that the findings are easily accessible and open to everyone in search of more information regarding the developmental process of counsellors. Secondly, a summary of the research findings will also be shared with the participants that opted to receive them. Lastly, findings from this study may be further published in academic journals and/or presented at relevant conferences.

Conclusion

From start to finish, the road travelled in the enterprise of increasing our understanding of authentic counsellor identity development has been long and winding. For those of us who have chosen to be in the service of others, it is critical that we find the safe avenues to explore the parts of ourselves that both terrify and enliven us, and should we choose to continue, we must be willing to uncover and investigate more of ourselves as needed. In this way, we are demonstrating to ourselves and our clients that we are humble enough to walk alongside them and courageous enough to embrace our own vulnerability.

I have been profoundly affected by the training and unconditional positive regard extended to me throughout the process of becoming a counsellor, which has widely informed the impetus for this research. My experiences in life leading up to the training shaped and prepared me in numerous ways. Some conditioning required un-conditioning; nonetheless, I, just like the participants in the study, came to the practice built with innate knowing and abilities. My guiding sense of intuition and attunement required safety and acceptance in order to be fully trusted and integrated into my identity, and just like the participants, my process is still evolving.

Identified in this research are collective experiences, aspects of being a human that can inform what it means and feels like to embark on anything new or challenging, and as such, the practices and understanding that were described translated directly into my experience as a novice researcher. At the outset, I aimed to find my voice and place within the work, and often felt overwhelmed by the literature and skilled voices of other proficient writers. I gained support and confidence alongside peers as we worked through our stuck points and continued building the necessary momentum to arrive at the next phase. Interviewing participants was a beautiful stage of the research. Hearing their unique stories of authentic personal and professional development was a privilege and I am honoured to have been granted access to their process. Although all their accounts were unique, similarities existed, and the most striking aspect of hearing their stories was the consistency in how they described their felt authentic presence and the subsequent authentic exchange with their clients. I listened with reverence to these awe-filled moments during the interview process and again during transcription. I continued to be moved during the analysis process as I repeatedly poured over their words and never tired of how deeply beautiful and vulnerable this process of becoming is. Weaving through the stories in the coding and theming phase of analysis was trying as the evolution of becoming oneself is such an intricately interwoven process and I often found myself entangled in the words and meanings when trying to disentangle one aspect from the rest. Seeing the big picture was easy, explaining it proved difficult at times.

The more we all risk exposing the truest versions of ourSelves in the presence of others the more tolerable it becomes to sit alone in our experience. We come to know what safety feels like in our bodies, what trust in others involves, and what next steps to take in life when the foundation of who we are is considered enough. Authenticity generates authenticity. As each

step along the way to discovery is part of a larger process, it is dynamically involved with every

aspect of existence and even the smallest moments hold miraculous capacity for connection,

insight, and awe.

It is my hope that counsellors prepare themselves to do the sincere work of their own

inner exploration and to decide how they want to live in this life in order to facilitate such a

process for their clients. We all deeply desire the same essentials of love, acceptance, and

understanding, and through the findings of this research, and more like it, I hope the profession

continues to further its appreciation of what it means to be human in a complex world. The

professional role of the counsellor intrudes into one's personhood and the essence of who one *is*

is called to the forefront and asked to stay. I have witnessed others answering this call and I

endeavour to live the same.

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Appendix A: Recruitment E-mail

Good Morning/Afternoon,

My name is Kira Robertson and I am a graduate student at UNBC completing my Masters of

Education in Counselling. I am completing a thesis entitled, "Becoming Congruent: Experiences

of Counsellors in the Development of Their Authentic Selves" and am seeking participants for

my study. I have attached a poster with information regarding the study and would appreciate if

you would post in a common area for your staff. I would like to interview counsellors and

discuss what it means to them to engage authentically in their practice of counselling and the

process by which they feel they have developed an authentic presence in their role as a

counsellor.

Participants must be registered professional counsellors with a Master's degree in counselling or

have completed their Master's degree and are awaiting registration. Counsellors are welcome to

distribute the poster or my contact information to other counsellors whom they feel may be

interested in participating in the study.

Please feel free to contact me directly if you have any questions.

Kind Regards,

Kira Robertson, M.Ed (candidate)

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

<u>Research Participants Needed</u>

Counsellor Experiences of Developing Their Authentic Selves

- Are you a registered counsellor with a professional association?

- Or, have you completed your Master's in counselling training to become a registered

  counsellor and are just awaiting registration?

If so, and you would like to volunteer for a graduate thesis research project, I would like to

hear from you. All that is required is:

- 1 hour of your time for a one-on-one interview

  - via Zoom

  - <u>or</u> in-person (with safety protocol for physical distancing in place)

- 30-minute <u>possible</u> follow-up after first interview (Zoom or in-person)

I would love to hear about what it means to you to engage authentically with yourself and your

work as a counsellor.

If you are interested, or have further questions, please contact below at your earliest

convenience:

Kira Robertson

kroberts@unbc.ca

Appendix C: Information Letter

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Information Letter

September 8, 2021

Becoming Congruent: Experiences of Counsellors in the Development of Their Authentic Selves

Who is conducting the study?

Student researcher:
Kira L. Robertson
Counselling/Education
University of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9
kroberts@unbc.ca

Supervisor:
Dr. Linda O'Neill
Counselling/Psychology
University of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9
250.961.6414
Linda.O'Neill@unbc.ca

This research is required for the fulfillment of a thesis for a Masters of Education in Counselling degree. As such, the completed thesis will be a public document stored on the university library database. Information from participants used in this research process to complete the thesis will be anonymized and will only be accessible to the principle researcher, Kira L. Robertson, and supervisor, Dr. Linda O'Neill.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this project is to better understand the experiences of counsellors in developing their authentic identity. The intention is to comprehend the process by which counsellors have come to integrate their personal and professional selves into a uniquely entwined therapeutic role. You are being invited to share your story which may prove useful for other counselling professionals along their developmental journey. Participants for this study must be registered professional counsellors with a Master's degree in counselling or have completed their Master's degree and are awaiting registration.

How will the study be conducted?

If you say 'Yes' and agree to voluntarily take part in this study, you will be asked to:

- Take part in a private one-on-one interview either via a secure UNBC Zoom platform or in-person. In-person interviews can be conducted in a private outdoor location of your choice. The choice of an in-person interview is up to you, however, current COVID-19 restrictions and provincial health orders may require that these are undertaken remotely using the secure UNBC Zoom platform. The interview will last approximately one hour. You will be asked to share your experience of developing your authentic identity as a counsellor which will include asking about any barriers you faced along your training and/or developmental process. Regardless of interview format, the interviews will be audio tape-recorded so the material can later be analyzed by the researcher. You may end the interview and/or turn off the tape recorder at any time.

- After the interviews have been analyzed, you may be asked to help check the results. This will involve a short interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. You will be able to add any information that was missed or needs clarifying and let the researcher know if the results make sense to you.

Benefits and risks to participating in the study

A potential benefit to participating in this study is that it may feel good to share to share your unique story about developing as a counsellor over time and it may be another opportunity for increased insight. Sharing your story may provide useful accounts to other counsellors embarking on the journey of personal and professional integration. In the sharing of your account, the knowledge about what it means to be authentic in the therapeutic relationship and the process by which it serves and supports both counsellor and client in the change process may be extended. Giving voice to the counsellor's experience may help current and future counsellors develop their own authentic way of being.

While I do not see any inherent risk in discussing this topic, it is still a vulnerable aspect of your lived experience and you may feel distressed at some point during the research process. For example, this may include aspects of your experience where you faced challenges or obstacles in developing your authentic identity as a counsellor. In sharing your story, I encourage you to only include that which you are comfortable speaking about. Should distress occur, you may end the interview at any point and/or you may withdraw from the study. Additionally, counselling resources will be made available to you.

Should you choose to participate in the study and conduct an in-person interview, please be sure to thoroughly review the below section "Risks of in-person contact during the research" in order to ensure proper COVID-19 safety protocol is adhered to. During the interview, the researcher will be responsible for ensuring all COVID-19 safety protocol are followed (i.e., proper sanitization of surfaces, providing hand sanitizer and face masks, and ensuring a safe 6ft distance is maintained).

Measures to maintain anonymity and confidentiality

Should you choose to participate, any identifiable information will be removed from the final research product. Interviews will be transcribed by the researcher and a code will be generated and used in replace of your name. Only the researcher will have access to your identifying information. Your interview responses (your data) will be shared between the researcher and research supervisor to ensure proper analysis. During consultation with the research supervisor, your identity will not be disclosed. While every attempt is made to protect your privacy and confidentiality, anonymity cannot be completely guaranteed.

Audio recordings of the interviews will be stored and locked in a cabinet within the researcher's secure office. Electronic copies will be stored on the secure UNBC server. The recordings will be kept in this location until completion of the final research product; upon completion, the recordings and hard copies of transcripts will remain with the research supervisor for two years, after which they will be destroyed.

Study Results

Results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis (and thus also available on the UNBC Geoffrey R. Weller Library database) and may also be published in journal articles or presented at conferences. If you wish to review your transcribed interview, or a summary of the research findings, you may contact the researcher, Kira Robertson, via e-mail at kroberts@unbc.ca, or state below in the consent form that you wish to have a copy e-mailed or mailed to you.

Notice of COVID-Related Risks during Research

Please read this form before you consent to participate in a research study. Be advised that all COVID-19 related safety protocols will be followed as per the latest provincial health authority guidelines, including the wearing of masks if/when meeting in person, the use of alcohol based hand sanitizer, and the disinfecting of hard surfaces. Please also talk to the researcher about any concerns you have before signing the consent form or agreeing to participate in the research. Remember that research participants may withdraw from a study at any time, without giving a reason.

Contact Tracing

The researcher may be required by public health authorities to share your contact information if there is a chance that you have been exposed to COVID-19 during a study visit. You will find more information about contact tracing on the BC Centre for Disease control website: http://www.bccdc.ca/healthinfo/diseases-conditions/covid-19/self-isolation/contact-tracing.

How does contact tracing work?

If public health authorities ask the researcher to provide a list of people who they have been in contact with, the researcher will be required to share your contact details. The researcher will not share information about the purpose of your contact, the name of the study, or anything about the

research topic. Your contact tracing information will be kept securely and separate from de-identified research records and will be deleted 30 days after your last contact with the researcher It is important to know that because of this your anonymity will not be preserved.

What if I want to withdraw from the study?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to answer any question(s) that make you feel uncomfortable and you retain the right to withdraw consent at any time throughout the study. If you choose to withdraw, any information you have provided will also be withdrawn and securely destroyed.

If at any time you decide to withdraw from the study, the research team will only continue to store your contact information for as long as required by public health authorities due to contact tracing.

Risks of in-person contact during the research

For research that involves in-person activities such as focus groups, interviews or observations, the researchers will be following safety plans that have been approved by the University. They include: safe use of facilities (including outdoor spaces), experimental equipment, personal protective devices, and physical distancing. If you are required to use public transit to get to or from a research location, this may increase your risk of being exposed to COVID-19. We encourage you to take all precautions, including wearing a face mask while in public, washing your hands, avoiding touching your face, and keeping a safe physical distance from others (at least 2 metres or 6 feet). Please let the researcher know if you want more information about the safety plans that have been put in place.

What if I have COVID-19 symptoms or am diagnosed with COVID-19?

Before every research activity, the researcher will ask each person who is present a series of questions about their health. The questions have been recommended by public health authorities, and ask about physical symptoms, if you have been in contact with people who are sick, and other questions. Based on your responses, the researcher will decide if it is safe to proceed with the in- person activity. Ensure that you keep the research team's contact information (included on the consent form) so you can share it with public health authorities in the event that you become sick after participating in research.

Questions, Concerns or Complaints about the project

If you have any questions or concerns about the research please feel free to contact the researcher, Kira Robertson at kroberts@unbc.ca, or the research supervisor, Dr. Linda O'Neill at Linda.O'Neill@unbc.ca. If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experience while participating in this study, please contact the UNBC Office of Research at 250.960.6735 or vial e-mail at reb@unbc.ca.

Appendix D: Participant Consent and Withdrawal

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Participant Consent and Withdrawal

Becoming Congruent: Experiences of Counsellors in the Development of Their Authentic Selves

Student researcher:
Kira L. Robertson
Counselling/Education
University of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9
kroberts@unbc.ca

Supervisor:
Dr. Linda O'Neill
Counselling/Psychology
University of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9
250.961.6414
Linda.O'Neill@unbc.ca

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact on you.

CONSENT

I have read or been described the information presented in the information letter about the project.

YES   NO

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this project and to receive additional details I requested.

YES   NO

I understand that if I agree to participate in this project, I may withdraw from the project at any time up until the report completion, with no consequences of any kind.

YES   NO

I understand that my information may be made available for COVID-19 contact tracing should an in-person interview be conducted and as required by current public health regulations.

YES   NO

I have been given a copy of this form.

YES   NO

I agree to be audio recorded.

YES   NO

I would like to receive a copy of my transcribed interview at the below e-mail or mailing address.

YES   NO

I would like to receive a summary of the research findings at the below e-mail or mailing address.

YES   NO

Signature: _____

Name of Participant (Printed): _____

E-mail or mailing address (if YES above): _____

Date: _____

Appendix E: Counselling Resources

Prince George, B.C.:

Prince George Native Friendship Centre – 250.564.3568

Community Counselling Centre – 250.562.6690

Repiphany Counselling – 250.962.2415

HML Wellness Solutions – 236.423.0077

UNBC Wellness Centre (current UNBC students) – 250.960.6369

Appendix F: Interview Questions

1. Was your experience of authentic counsellor identity formation a conscious process or did it just occur?

2. If you were conscious of the process, were there any barriers that you encountered?

3. How did you know when you were being authentic?

4. Who, if anyone, impacted this process for you or with you?

5. How has the process changed over time?

6. In what way has your authentic identity impacted you and/or your clients?