

The development of counsellor identity — a visual expression

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The diversity of the South African population requires counsellors who are able to promote the mental health of all persons who express a need for this service. The newly introduced registration category of registered counsellors aims to provide mental health services on a primary level; yet the professional identity of registered counsellors is not well established. This is reflected in the lack of an integrated and standardised national training policy for the BPsych programme as well as a disregard by potential employers of graduates of this programme, as seen in the limited number of appropriate job advertisements and placements in the media. In this study we explore the development of counsellor identity by means of the visual presentations participants produced regarding their development. The social constructionist notion of the self as being composed of different selves is used as the theoretical background for this qualitative investigation. An analysis of the visual presentations revealed that counsellors developed a capacity for experiences of uncertainty, increased self-knowledge and ability to reflect on themselves. They experienced personal growth as part of their identity development-in-process. Visual material as a form of expression makes it possible to challenge some of the limitations of verbal text to construct knowledge and facilitates thinking about those elements of the social world which cannot be expressed in talk.

Keywords: counsellor identity; postmodern view of identity; registered counsellors; relational self; story grid; visual representations

The changing socio-cultural context in South Africa requires a greater urgency for mental health interventions on a primary, preventative level. More people from previously disadvantaged communities have become aware of mental health services, but most of the treatment models are based in a western culture, which is often inappropriate and irrelevant in an African context (Olivier, 1992; Seedat, Duncan & Lazarus, 2001). Furthermore, psychologists continue to play a very limited role in the delivery of mental health services to all (Kriegler, 1988; Mauer, 1987).

Within this context the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) has created a new registration category for psychological counsellors. Although the registration of this category has been finalised, the position of the counsellors remains complex and unsatisfactory. Developing a professional identity is therefore of the utmost importance in the training process of the students. In this regard, Corey (1996, p. 109) argues that

the training of a multi-cultural counsellor does not rest on gaining knowledge and skills with regard to different theories, but also on producing counsellors who have self-awareness. Counsellors must first know themselves before they can employ any counselling technique successfully.

Focusing on the identity of the counsellor not only assists in students' differentiation processes within the mental health professions, but also facilitates greater efficiency in their work as counsellors.

Postmodern view of identity

Within a postmodern framework, the view of the self as a rigid and unchanging unity is challenged

by the belief that the self is constructed through the practice of language within relational contexts (Anderson & Goolishian 1992; Bruffee, 1986; Gergen, 1994; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Shotter, 1992). Social constructionists prefer to use the concepts identity or self, rather than the word personality that may indicate something that is stable and enduring (Raskin, 2002). Identity is therefore not perceived as something stable or essential (Burr, 1995; Gergen 1994), but is envisaged as being continually constructed and reconstructed in relational contexts (Gover, 2003).

The personal and professional development of counsellors

Various models have been developed to describe the personal development of counsellors but, for the purposes of this study, Hogan's (1964) and Stoltenberg and Delworth's (1987) models were used. According to Hogan's model, there are four levels of development in the process of becoming a counsellor. During level one, counsellors are perceived as insecure and dependent. Level two sees counsellors struggling with a dependency versus autonomy conflict. At level three, counsellors experience conditional dependency because of their heightened professional self-confidence and greater insight into their motivations for becoming a counsellor. The themes at level four include personal autonomy and a higher level of insight into their own motivation, which has stabilised.

Stoltenberg and Delworth's (1987) integrated developmental model also describes four levels of development. During level one, counsellors are required to master new skills and require opportunities to put knowledge and skills to practice. Themes in level two include a shift away from a self-preoccupation to a focus on the client. During level three, a more stable, autonomous and reflective counsellor develops, with a personalised approach to practice and a greater use and understanding of the self. The process concludes with reaching the stage of "integrated counsellor" on level four.

Training contexts and the development of professional identity

Discussion of the training of psychologists and counsellors is based on the scientist-practitioner and the professional-practitioner orientations. During 1949 it was recommended that training programmes be structured according to a scientist-practitioner model, in which research and application of theory would be equally important (Aspenson & Gersh, 1993; Benishek, 1998; Stoltenberg, Pace, Kashubeck-West, Biever, Patterson & Welsch, 2000). The professional-practitioner model was suggested as an alternative training model to the scientist-practitioner model. This model did not prescribe any particular ideology or training strategy, but rather suggested that each individual programme should use the available resources to the greatest effect (Parker, 1986).

Van Schalkwyk, Kokot-Louw and Pauw (2002) state that the scientist-practitioner orientation does not provide an appropriate framework for the training of counsellors in short-term interventions and community-based work as required by the realities in South Africa. They state further that the primary and preventative work of counsellors requires a shift towards more community-based work and hands-on training. This alternative approach to training poses a number of challenges which include (1) developing a relevant theoretical framework, (2) finding an appropriate model that provides a sound psychological epistemology, and (3) organising a suitable curriculum that provides the scope and content for scientifically sound learning. Furthermore, registered counsellors differ from other primary health care professionals in that they should be psychologically minded, which means that the counsellor should not only focus on content, but should also be able to read and interpret process. To be able to read process, it is important to develop the skill of self-reflection within a certain body of theoretical knowledge (Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2002).

Our purpose in this study was to explore the development of counsellor identity by analysing visual projects which were produced as an illustration of developing counsellor identity.

METHOD

The interpretative nature of this study acknowledges the researcher as part of the research process (Flick, 2002; Gergen & Gergen, 1991). As lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria, I approached the participants registered for the Structured Counselling module, at the beginning of their final year, to participate in exploring the process of becoming a counsellor in the context of a particular training process.

As an attempt at deconstructing the discourse of power/knowing, I introduced myself by my first name to the students and encouraged them to use it. To further deconstruct the power/knowing discourse on a practical level, the students and I engaged in “acts of resistance” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p.95). These “acts of resistance” included the following:

- I asked the students to name the module according to their experience of it.
- I participated in the role plays as both counsellor and client. Some days I would volunteer to be in the position of client, and some days I would be the counsellor.
- In the beginning of each training session, I had conversations with the students on the process of the module, encouraging them to suggest changes according to their needs, if and when they arose.

Research context

The development of the training programme was grounded in the ways that the University of Pretoria, through the Department of Psychology, conceptualised the purpose and outcomes of the BPsych programme. The structure of the four-year undergraduate programme in psychology consisted of two sections. The first two years comprised general training in psychology aimed at equipping students with a knowledge base broad enough to understand the complexity of human behaviour. In the third and fourth year, fundamental modules on programme development, ethics and society, diversity and change were introduced. Fundamental modules were aimed at facilitating a sound scientific approach and core modules included adult psychopathology, community psychology, basic interviewing skills, structured intervention skills, and psychological assessment. Both fundamental and core modules were compulsory for all students and were regarded as representative of the core disciplines in psychology.

In this research we studied the structured intervention skills module which was offered in the fourth year of study. The narrative counselling process was used as a learning model that informed both content and process. The general sequence of the narrative counselling process as set out by Morgan (2002), from engaging in externalising conversations, moving towards thickening and strengthening the emerging alternative story, provided a guideline for the structure and the process of the module. On a practical level, the different aspects of the narrative counselling process were used as themes for discussion and practical work for the training sessions. The number of sessions dedicated to themes was not decided on beforehand. The texts of Doan (1997), Freedman and Combs (1996) and Gergen (1992) were specifically chosen for a basic introduction and definition of the concepts of postmodernism, social constructionism and the narrative metaphor in psychology, while Morgan’s (2000) book was selected as an introductory text to the process of narrative counselling.

Participants

Fifty-four students participated in a training programme in 2002 to become registered counsellors. Five of the students were male and 49 were female. Of these, 53 students were white, with one black female student. These numbers also reflect the slow process of transformation in the profession of psychology (Elkonin & Sandison, 2006).

Of the students in this study, 16 were English-speaking and 38 Afrikaans-speaking. The students’ ages ranged from 22 to 53 years, with 44 of the 54 students falling into the 22 to 24 year age range.

Ethical considerations

Permission from the Head of Department as well as from the Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria was obtained for this research. A letter of informed consent was given to students if they wished to participate in the research. Participation in this research was voluntary and no negative consequences would ensue if they did not participate. The process of evaluation during the module was identical for both participants and non-participants, in order to minimise the creation of a reality that participation would be advantageous in terms of results. They also had the freedom of choice to withdraw from the study but still participate in the module. None of the students withdrew from the study. In writing their stories, pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities.

Data gathering — Visual projects

The guidelines provided by Clandinin and Connelly (1994) as well as Lawler's (2002) guide to the process of data production and analysis were used in this study. The specific context of the study was within the context of a higher education setting, and it required three formal evaluation opportunities. These opportunities consisted of (1) participants writing about their experiences of the training process, (2) journal writing, and (3) creating something that would reflect their processes of developing a counsellor identity and reflecting on it. These visual projects were digitally photographed. Harper (1994) and Punch (1998) maintain that visual representation is helpful in the process of getting to know ourselves; it allows us to communicate statements to others that could not be done in words. The participants also reflected on their own visual projects in written format, and these were included in the analysis phase as the participants' own interpretations of their work.

Analysis of visual and written data

Devine and Heath (1999) report that it is possible to treat nonverbal products as text, but constituting visual material as text may miss the point of having visual data augmenting textual data. The analysis of visual data therefore aims to explore the ways in which the projects reflect something of the makers' narratives on the training process and on their identities as counsellors (Emmison & Smith, 2000). The process of analysis of the two- and three-dimensional projects was informed by Penn's (2000) work on semiotic analysis. Semiotic analysis here refers to the literal meaning of the data, and the dominant cultural discourses. The work of Weber (2003) and Emmison and Smith (2000) on three-dimensional visual data also guided the analysing process. The analysis process comprised the following steps and was entered into a story grid (see Tables 1 and 2):

- Create a denotational inventory by identifying the elements in the material by listing the constituents systematically and cataloguing the literal meaning of the material. Analyse the higher forms of signification. This step consisted of asking questions about the listed elements in the denotational inventory (Penn, 2000; Weber, 2003).
- Allow themes and statements to reveal themselves. This step in the analysis procedure included reflecting the aim of the study: to create the context in which themes and statements that emerged from the data had meaning (Richmond, 2002).

Trustworthiness

The work of Guba and Lincoln (1989), Janesick (2000), Kvale, (1995) and Mertens (1998), with the methods of validating narrative research developed by Riessman (1993), were integrated to produce the model which was used in this research.

Prolonged and substantial engagement at the research site, coherence and triangulation are concepts that relate to the trustworthiness of this qualitative research project (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Janesick, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Mertens, 1998). I spent eight months in the research setting and in engagement with the data until it emerged that themes were repeating and that no new

themes were emerging. In this research project, data triangulation was used in collecting different forms of data (Janesick, 2000).

Coherence as a criterion exists on three levels — global, local and thematic coherence. This has implications for the overall goals of the study, namely, whether I am able to accomplish my initial research “goal”, being the description of the process of developing counsellor identity, while taking into account the way that participants’ narratives are written. It is also clear that continuous conversations must take place between these two levels of coherence, since staying true to the participants’ stories sometimes involves changing the research story. The third level of coherence, thematic coherence, involves the repeated use of research text on certain themes, highlighting the “grounded nature” of emerging themes and acknowledging the co-constructed nature of the research.

FINDINGS

The following section provides examples of only two of the participants (see Figures 1 and 2, Tables 1 and 2). Thereafter, the summarised findings of the complete data set will be discussed, with more examples to illustrate the emerging themes.

Interpretation of Figure 1

In the beginning of the course the participant (Challenge) experienced herself as rather rigid and judgmental and felt that her knowledge about people informed and protected her. She could now see how she has “unwrapped” herself by allowing her discourses to be challenged. She could start changing shape and colour and learn about “the different shades of grey”. She could become more flexible through the process of being chewed (by the course content). She specifically used chewing gum and not other foodstuffs, because she felt that chewing gum is not consumed, but could also retain some of its original characteristics. Through letting go of her knowledge, she would be able to be a flexible counsellor. She grew from a rigid square to a vital life-filled bubble that could absorb and appreciate more of life.

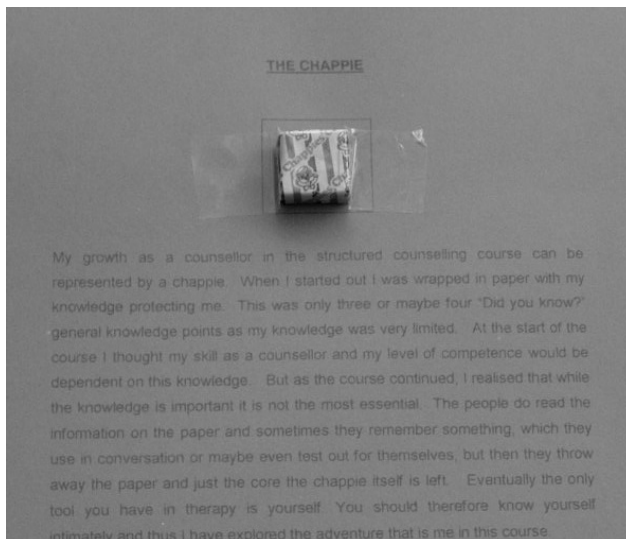


Figure 1. Participant “Challenge”
(Chappie’s chewing gum) — Visual project

Table 1. Story grid: “Challenge” (Chappie’s chewing gum)

Denotational inventory	Signification	Student’s reflection
One Chappie’s chewing gum, wrapped in paper with frame around it.	The wrapper is essential protection and serves as information about what is on the inside.	<p>She was wrapped in paper with her knowledge protecting her.</p> <p>She thought her skill as a counsellor was dependent on this knowledge.</p> <p>During the course she realises that knowledge is important, but not essential.</p> <p>The course teaches her about different shades of grey and to be more comfortable with lack of fixed structure and rigid assumptions.</p> <p>She is now an expert in listening and introducing hope, not an expert on human beings.</p> <p>She can see that growth and change can take place without her, and that she can maybe assist the process.</p> <p>She has learnt that in becoming flexible, she can reach greater heights of personal growth. She can grow from a rigid square to a vital life-filled bubble that can absorb and appreciate more of life.</p>

Interpretation of Figure 2

Participant 2 (The Evolution) wrote that his monkey stage occurred at the beginning of the year when he was excited and eager to learn a new approach to counselling. He moved on to the not-so-happy gorilla stage when they were expected to apply their learning in role-plays, and when he had to expose himself. This vulnerability made him defensive and stubborn, but he admits that he was actually scared. With continuous involvement and reflection, however, he was able to move through this stage and into the prehistoric man stage. The final stage is the millennium man, where he is today. Being the counsellor in the role-play, he realised that the only way he was going to grow and learn was by taking risks and moving from his comfort zone into his stretch zone. As a counsellor this process gave him courage and made him believe in himself and in his abilities.

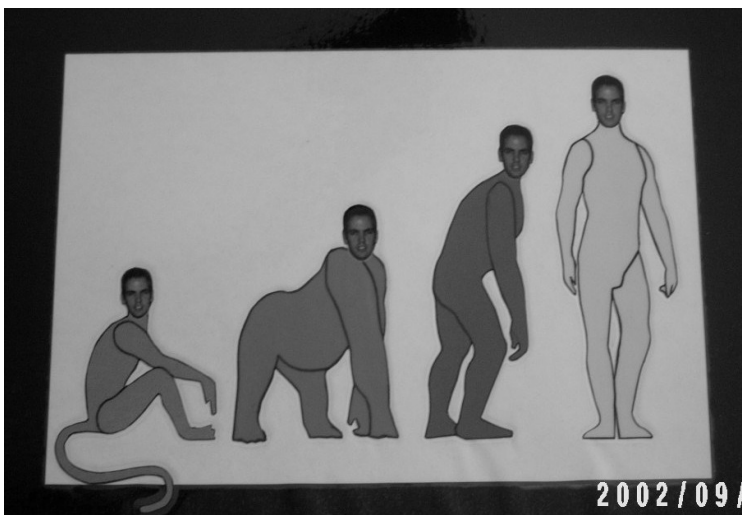


Figure 2. Participant: “The Evolution” (The Coin) — Visual project

Table 2. Story grid: “The Evolution” (The Coin)

Denotational inventory	Signification	Student’s reflection
Four figures bearing a photo of student’s face. The figures are portrayed in an evolutionary process.	Signifies development.	The monkey stage: thrilled at the prospect of learning about a new approach. Not-so-happy gorilla stage: When they were expected to apply it in role-plays. Prehistoric man stage: This stage was riddled with frustration. Trying to apply and get his head around the concepts of narrative therapy was harder than he expected. The millennium man stage: This is where he is today. He feels strong and is willing to give it all he has. He realised that the only way he was going to grow and learn was by taking risks and moving from his comfort zone into his stretch zone.

Summarised findings

In the analysis of all the visual projects, four themes were identified: capacity for uncertainty; increased self-knowledge; self-reflection and growth.

Theme 1: Capacity for uncertainty

Participants wrote about their developing capacity for uncertainty and of being more comfortable in not achieving an end point or specified outcome:

I experienced my development to be roads on a journey. I embarked on a very uncertain journey, not knowing where I am going or where the journey in narrative therapy would lead me. I was very uncomfortable with some of the ideas at first.

One student wrote:

During the process of change, mixed feelings occur. Feelings with regard to competence, values, success and relationships all come into question. The immersing in the change process exposes the client over and over to the severe conflict between present emotional pain and future uncertainty.

Theme 2: Increased self-knowledge

Despite their scepticism, the students continued to learn more and more about themselves and discovered aspects of themselves that gave a new dimension to their lives. They were often scared of the unknown, but became more and more comfortable, which made it possible for them to see and appreciate their growth. One student reflected on this by saying:

My work should be an extension of myself. I am a therapeutic instrument. I have grown to realize that I can’t observe people from behind a mask or hide my characteristics as a person.

On reflecting back they thought that it was exactly the new and different learning environment that facilitated their active and greater than usual participation. They also experienced parts of themselves that they had not previously experienced, which made them aware of the fact that they did not know themselves as well as they thought they did. As a student said:

The exercise that we had to do was excellent and mind altering. I never knew that so few questions could cause light bulb moments.

Theme 3: Self-reflection

Self-reflection was a valuable experience as students had to look at their doubts, strengths, emotional experiences and behaviour. They had to be honest and “naked”, but also realised that they had to explore these issues in their own lives as they would impact on the counselling relationship. Self-reflection was therefore not always an easy narrative to use as part of their counsellor identity, as some of the discourses that were present and operating in their lives took time and deep introspection to deconstruct and repack in a manner that served them better:

I am scared of the domino effect changing my assumptions could have. Where do you stop and say enough before it is nihilistic. Why should it build such resistance in me? I suppose there is a reason for some things to be packed away in the bottom drawer.

Through performing self-reflection on a continuous basis, they could see that the only tool they have in counselling is themselves. They were ready to explore “the adventure that is me in this course”. In this parallel process, they felt that their lives as counsellors are part of who they are and the ways in which they define themselves. Students’ self-constructions made it possible for them to become aware of and choose between different positions, as one student stated:

To know what story dominates my life helped me to discover the events I relate as important as well as the events I leave out. This helped me gain a clearer perspective on my perceptions and I realised today that I don’t want to be living a story of survival, as it is limiting my life. I don’t want to be just alive — I want to be living!

Theme 4: Growth

The students felt that their growth as counsellors was also reflected in their personal growth experiences. They could see that the personal and the professional were woven into the texture of being human.

In learning to be flexible at a theoretical level, they could reach greater heights of personal growth and be more open to appreciating more of life. They felt that their growth experiences could not be found in textbooks and that the majority of the growth in training lies in personal experiences. These experiences enabled them to see more clearly the silhouette of themselves as counsellors. Seeing more clearly also meant building confidence in their counselling style. One student reflected on her visual construction:

She was wrapped in paper with her knowledge protecting her. During the course she realises that knowledge is important, but not essential. She is now an expert in listening and introducing hope, not an expert on human beings. She can see that growth and change can take place without her, and that she can maybe assist the process.

Another student reflected as follows on her journey of growth:

She used to see herself as the professional in control of diagnosis and therapy. She comes to the conclusion that in most cases labelling has a disempowering effect on people and realises that skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities enable people to be experts in their lives and assists them to reduce the influence of the problem in their lives. Her role is collaborative in mapping the direction of this journey.

DISCUSSION

The findings were supported by the theoretical models on counsellor development (Hogan, 1964; Loganbill, Hardy & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981). According to these models students progress from feelings of incompetence to feelings of more competence, and they move from a more dependent position to a more independent position in their relationship with the trainer or supervisor.

Various aspects of counsellor development were illustrated such as experiencing uncertainty, increased self-knowledge through reflective practices, and personal growth. In developing a capacity

for uncertainty, students struggled to challenge the more modernist descriptions of counsellors such as being the expert and having confidence. Hogan (in Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992) mentions that students are often insecure and dependent in the beginning stages of becoming a counsellor and what might have exacerbated this experience for the students in this study is that the expert definition of being a counsellor was also being taken away through engaging in a narrative counselling framework. For some students, however, this lack of structure was somewhat comforting as they realised that they did not have to steer the process, but that if they listened carefully and asked the right questions, it would be steered naturally by the client. Counselling is a relational process and the positioning of counsellors enables or limits clients' abilities to position themselves. According to Stoltenberg and Delworth's (1987) developmental model the shift away from a self-preoccupation to a focus on the client leads to the development of empathy.

The process of the students in this study also reflected elements of development as reflected in Stoltenberg and Delworth's model (1987). Students fluctuated between having confidence and not having confidence, and the ultimate resolution of being an autonomous and stable counsellor. The students in this study moved away from a position of stability and certainty towards flexibility and fluidity in relationships. This contrasts with Stoltenberg and Delworth's model that proposes the possibility of developing a position of certainty in practice. In their journey they could find comfort in the shared uncertainty among fellow students about doing counselling. Lührman (1998) states that "uncertain professionals are interpreters, highly conscious of their limitations, highly conscious of their capacity to distort, humble in the face of their ignorance and hesitant to assert their knowledge of someone else's life" (p.467).

The value of visual expressions made it possible to overcome some of the limitations of verbal text to construct knowledge; to contemplate ways of overcoming these and to facilitate thinking about those elements of the social world which cannot always be verbally expressed. Many of the visual presentations consisted of different parts, each of which contributed to the whole picture. Sometimes they were put together as an end product, and sometimes they were in a process of moving towards a next level of integration. In these visual projects, it emerges that identity could be viewed as something that is constructed and that is always in the process of being constructed. From a post-modern perspective identity is not perceived as something stable (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1994), but is seen as being in a process of continuous development.

The development of counsellor identity seems to fit within a postmodern view of self as a multi-levelled and fluid text (Sampson, 1989), where people are viewed as a community of selves and each story is associated with a particular sense of self. Self then consists of multiple provisional possibilities which are continuously revealed in different social contexts and exchanges (Gergen, 1994).

CONCLUSION

The South African context requires counsellors who can occupy positions of uncertainty and growth as an identity position, in order to facilitate growth and change in the client. Els and Schoeman (2000) state that clients are continuously in different situations and relationships in the changing contexts of their lives and counsellors should be trained "to cope with their own as well as the clients' difficulty to manage this change" (p. 48). It is not only the experience of uncertainty in training programmes, but the capacity to live with and through these narratives that equip counsellors with the ability to co-author clients' preferred life narratives.

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