

LETTERS ABOUT LETTERS:
CLIENTS' WRITTEN REFLECTIONS
ON THERAPEUTIC LETTERS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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NATHAN R. PYLE



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Letters about Letters: Clients' Written Reflections
on Therapeutic Letters

by

© Nathan R. Pyle, B.A.,B.S.W.(RSW)

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Abstract

Therapeutic letter writing as an adjunct to counselling has seen an increase in use by counsellors in the last decade yet limited research attention has been devoted to how clients receive such documents. This study, through a qualitative design, investigated the experiences of 7 clients who had received a letter from their counsellor during therapy. The data collected and analyzed was in the form of letters written by clients to the researcher. Four themes emerged from the analysis of the clients' letters: Curiosity and Connection; Consolidation: Relationships and Session Content; Facilitating and Hindering; and In Perpetuity: The Tangible and Lasting Presence of Letters.

The participants' written words to the researcher reflect that the therapeutic letter they received played an active role in their counselling experience. The participants' letters offer guidance and thought for counsellors considering and engaging in therapeutic letter writing. These are reviewed along with a discussion of the influences of the internet and email and future research possibilities.

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Although this document bears my name, its completion was a result of the guidance, encouragement and support of many. First and foremost is God. I am not sure any Graduate student completes their coursework or a thesis without the utterance of a prayer. I certainly sent a few off. Thanks.

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Ave Maria

When we were born, our awestruck mother smiled.

God gave her love to give the wondering child.

And later, seeing such a little one,

We feel her endless grace and pass it on.

Robert Greer Cohn

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The objective of this thesis research is to explore clients' experiences and their use of letters that were sent to them by their counsellor. Over the past decade, the practice of 'therapeutic' letter writing has been gaining recognition as a valuable adjunct to counselling sessions. In the published literature, numerous counsellors have described their experiences with letter writing however minimal attention has been devoted to the understanding of how clients receive such documents. This investigation explored the use of therapeutic letters from the clients' perspective and maintained a consistent form (i.e., the use of letters) throughout the process.

Background

Letters have a rich and prominent place in our history. Dawson and Dawson (1909b) consider letter writing to be one of the oldest forms of literature and state it as certainly the most intimate and sincere. Letters have documented the lives of many men and women (e.g., Sigmund Freud, Milton Erickson, Virginia Woolf and Lewis Carroll); they have recorded historical events (e.g., wars, discoveries, disasters); and have been the foundation and starting point of many contemporary genres (e.g., newspapers, novels). Despite the recognition and status accorded to the letter, the introduction of telecommunications along with the increasing advancement of other forms of communication (e.g., mobile phones, voice-mail, electronic mail, fax machines) has

brought about a decline and movement away from communicating with letters (Decker, 1998). Although this shift has been made in exchange for speed and convenience, it has also perhaps increased the traditional letters value as a rare gift that may be more dearly treasured (Moules, 2000).

Within counselling, there has been a growing acceptance as to the usefulness of incorporating written communication despite the predominantly verbal means by which counselling issues are addressed. A number of studies have outlined the benefits of client writing noting both emotional and physiological improvements (Esterling, L'Abate, Murray & Pennebaker, 1999; Lange, van der Wall & Emmelkamp, 2000; Smyth, 1998; Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, & Kaell, 1999). These and other studies exploring the use of writing in counselling have been focused significantly on the client as the principal author. Less attention and focus has been directed at written material initiated by the counsellor.

Letter writing to clients (a form of written communication), has been used by counsellors from various theoretical backgrounds, however the term and clinical practice of "therapeutic letters" is, for the most part, attributed to narrative therapy (please see Appendix A for an example of a therapeutic letter). In particular, it is associated with the work of Australian family therapist Michael White and New Zealand family therapist David Epston (Epston, 1994; White, 1995, in press; White & Epston, 1990). Their conceptualization of therapy and use of different means of documenting a client's story has renewed an interest in counsellor-authored letter writing.

Therapeutic letters have been characterized in different ways but they generally have the following features: they are composed by the counsellor and often mailed to the individual client or family between counselling sessions; they go beyond a summary of what has taken place in the counselling session; they are literary rather than diagnostic; and they begin to tell an alternative story and inquire about what is to come (Epston, 1994; Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997; Harper-Jacques & Masters, 1994; Moules, 2002). Cumulative descriptive and clinical evidence seems to reflect that the counsellor-authored letter contributes to successful outcomes in therapy and that it is “therapeutically efficacious” (Wood & Uhl, 1988, p.35). Despite these claims, there is a clear paucity of empirical or formal descriptive studies that substantiate such statements.

Problem Statement

The recent shift and acceptance of post-modern and social constructionist ideas within counselling has resulted in many therapists moving to adopt different techniques and philosophical stances. This movement has encouraged counsellors to reflect on how they practice and how they position themselves in relation to the client. Many counsellors now identify their practice as being primarily influenced by post-modernism yet this identification and the use of certain practices, has been assumed almost uncritically (Held, 1995).

Therapeutic letter writing, emerging from narrative therapy and the postmodern paradigm, is a practice valued by many counsellors yet guided or informed by limited formal research or understanding from the clients who receive these letters. This project,

therefore, addresses this need by exploring how clients understand therapeutic letters and the value they place upon them.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this research is to explore the value and significance of therapeutic letters in clients' lives. This study sought to capture the first-hand experiences of clients who had received one or more letters from their counsellor. The research was guided by the following question: *"What meanings and significance do clients attribute to a therapeutic letter they have received from their counsellor?"*

Being lead by this question, this project was carried out as a qualitative study with counsellors and their clients from across Canada. The data collected and analyzed were letters that had been written to the researcher by clients reflecting on their experiences of receiving a therapeutic letter. As well, secondary information was gained from the counsellors through the use of a questionnaire. The questions explored their understanding and clinical use of therapeutic letters.

Significance

Although the practice of letter writing is generally situated within a narrative theoretical framework, counsellors from various therapeutic traditions have engaged in such writing. Therefore, this study holds significance not only for narrative-oriented counsellors but counsellors interested in a greater understanding of letter writing and how these letters impact their clients' lives. As more counsellors begin to explore and

experiment with written communication with their clients, this study offers them a view of how such written documents are received and used by clients.

Limitations of the Study

The decision to study therapeutic letters through the medium of letters involved accepting limitations. A central one was access to clients and the ability to extend a “conversation” with them. In studies involving participant interviews, there is opportunity for a rapport to emerge and for the interview to explore a range of areas in varying depths. This study involved no face-to-face contact with participants but relied on the delicate, ambassador-like presence of letters. Due to the mechanisms that needed to be established in relation to protecting the client-counsellor relationship, voluntary consent, and confidentiality, only one letter was collected from each participant with the exception of one participant who wrote twice. The written words and the data that emerged from the letters were very valuable but further depth may have been added with additional exchanges of letters between researcher and participant.

Definition of Terms

Counselling and Psychotherapy (Therapy): These terms have been widely used in the literature and in practice and some distinctions and definitions have been put forward. Crago (2000) differentiates counselling and psychotherapy in terms of clients, context, and in particular, accessing the unconscious. Psychotherapy is thought to be a more profound and thorough experience which incorporates the unconscious into the process.

Counselling, on the other hand, is suggested to be of shorter duration with relatively “normal” clients experiencing a crisis. The focus is more on conscious behavior change.

In day-to-day practice however, these distinctions are blurred and can be considered fluid. As the researcher is a practicing counsellor, it was decided in this thesis to use these terms interchangeably and in a broader, more inclusive way. Furthermore, as research investigating the common factors or transtheoretical approaches has shown, there are very little differences “in outcomes among different types of therapy” (Hill & Nakayama, 2000, p.866). Thus, underpinning the theoretical distinctions is the commonality that counselling and psychotherapy are activities intended to nurture and enhance the psychological wellbeing of people.

In the same spirit, this thesis does not draw a distinction between the terms counsellor, clinician, or therapist. They are used interchangeably in this document to note an individual engaged in the professional practice of psychological counselling.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The structure of this thesis is separated into five chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 will discuss selected literature related to the topic of written communication and therapeutic letters. Chapter 3 will outline and describe the research methodology selected to address this topic while Chapter 4 will present the results of the data collected. The study will conclude with Chapter 5, which will summarize the findings and offer suggestions for counsellors interested in letter writing as well as future research.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Opening up the topic of letters invites one to explore a range of areas (e.g., history, great letter writers, letter structures, contemporary uses of the letter, etc.). Each of these plays a role in shaping this counselling intervention and to the process of writing a letter with therapeutic intentions. As the letter has received the designation of being the world's first written text (Earle, 1999), a starting point in looking at therapeutic letters is to revisit the history and tradition of letter writing.

The Letter Throughout the Ages

*I answer in writing because my thought will thus be more fully expressed
and fully received, like a sound amid silence – Mikhail Osipovich Gershenzon*

The history of letter writing is rich and provides a fascinating record of the progress of the human race (Dawson & Dawson, 1909a). Ancient and contemporary definitions of a “letter” relate to its use of a written message, frequently private, that is “sent to accompany or replace an oral injunction or private conversation between two persons geographically removed from one another”(Rosenmeyer, 2001, p.20). Letter writers have used this medium both due to necessity and as a preferred way to “communicate matters of secrecy, formality or emotional delicacy”(Rosenmeyer,2001, p.20). Despite the lack of a formal postal system, early letters were sent by a soldier or slave or if the letter was an official document of the military or government, it would be sent by a government

messenger. Those not considered “official” but more personal (i.e., a private letter), depended upon the often untrustworthy means of merchants or travelers heading in the direction the letter was intended (Rosenmeyer, 2001).

In historical and contemporary times, letter writing crosses formal and informal contexts and has been found across a wide range of cultures, communities, and continents (Barton & Hall, 2000). Early examination of writing reveals personal letters as well as diplomatic ones were common by two thousand years B.C. (Barton & Hall, 2000). In Egypt, archaeologists have discovered thousands of letters from both the elite and the less so. These letters were often used to establish early societies as well as to destroy them (Earle, 1999). Cicero, in 68 B.C., contributed to the tradition of letter writing and helped create a custom of publishing collected letters and established a formal decorum for epistolary composition (Howland, 1991).

The Bible is also a source of numerous letters. Written between 50 and 65 A.D., Paul’s epistles have attracted much study (Roetzel, 1991; Weima, 1994). There are a total of thirteen of Paul’s letters in the New Testament with each deriving from a “blend of familiarity (Paul writing to his friends) and sacredness (Paul imparting the word of God)” (Boureau, 1997, p.28).

Letters have also, due in part to their longstanding and widespread use, contributed to the creation of many contemporary genres. Bazerman (2000) outlines how letters have been the root of the patent (known originally as letters patent); the early scientific article; many business forms and record keeping documents; the novel; newspapers and other sources of public news.

Related to the pervasiveness of letters, has been the constant attention given to the composition and structure of a letter. Letter writers, regardless of whether writing a private letter or one intended for business or official purposes have been invited to learn about and refine how they compose such a document. Examples of such texts include: *A New Letter-Writer, for the Use of Ladies* (1860); *The Art of Writing Effective Letters* (1972); and more recently, *Everyday Letters for Busy People* (2004). Dawson and Dawson (1909a) provide an eloquent review of the valued qualities letter writers need to possess and should the author fall short of such a standard, their letters would appear contrived.

To write a really good letter requires a combination of qualities at once rare in themselves and rarer still in their conjunction. Thus the writer must himself be interesting, and have interesting matter to communicate; he must be something of an egoist, to whom his own sensations are noticeable, and worthy of notice; he must possess both daring and freedom, for the last place where caution and reticence are required is in the familiar epistle; he must be resolutely sincere, for the moment he begins to pose his magic wand is broken, and he becomes tedious and offensive; he must above all possess the intimate note, for without it he will produce an essay, but not a letter. Of all these qualities perhaps the last is the rarest, for a good letter is really a page from the secret memoirs of a man . . . For this is the first aim of a true letter, self-revelation. In many forms of literature self-revelation is the last thing that is to be expected; . . . but in a letter

we want this, and nothing less than this. The man who is not prepared to unlock his heart to us can never write a great letter (p.11-12).

The Decline of the Traditional Letter

Telecommunications have altered, and continue to alter, our experiences of space and time, of interpersonal presence and absence – William Merrill Decker

Throughout history, letters and letter writing have achieved both acclaimed status and been considered an inferior form of literature (Dawson & Dawson, 1909a). Regardless of how it was recognized, what could be considered the great letter writing age of the 1700's to the early 1900's, saw a gradual decline with the increase in telecommunications (Decker, 1998; Kermode & Kermode, 1995). Perhaps the last great moment for letter writing was the Second World War. During this time, there was most likely more letters written and received than at any other time in history (Hartley, 1999).

The movement away from letter writing has intensified due to our ability to rapidly communicate not only by phone, but our access to each other through electronic mail. Moules (2000) describes very vividly, potential consequences while pondering this decline. She writes: "As archival documents, letters more than any other medium, conserve biography and history. As letters dwindle, do our ties to history and past lives become tenuous and fragile?" (p.11). Conceivably, as Moules (2000) continues, the diminishing practice of letter writing may make the letter a rare gift. In turn, this may heighten or enhance the messages communicated in a letter and perhaps the intimate connection between writer and reader.

Written Communication in Clinical Practice

Adding writing to conversation in therapy, . . . hastens the discovery of new voices and, thus, the creation of new narratives – Peggy Penn & Marilyn Frankfurt

The inclusion of writing as an adjunct to counselling sessions has held a quiet but constant position in the field of psychotherapy. Counselling has predominantly been focused on the verbal exchanges between therapist and client. Overall, a limited but growing recognition has been given to the use of writing beyond the required documentation used in counselling practice (e.g., assessment reports, clinical case notes, and correspondence with other professionals). This writing is often completed on behalf of the client by the counsellor and is generally “about” the client (Bacigalupe, 1996). Despite the quiet recognition given to writing in therapy, many past and contemporary counsellors have used writing in their practice with the belief that it can play a role both as a means of communication and as a source of client self-expression.

In the literature, the use of client-authored writing in counselling has been defined in various ways however two definitions are most prominent. In a recent review of the literature, Wright and Chung (2001) propose the term “writing therapy”. They define this term as “client expressive and reflective writing, whether self-generated or suggested by a therapist/researcher”(p.279). Their definition is broad and includes client writing in both the context of a counselling relationship and in a self-help format.

Riordan (1996; Riordan & Soet, 2000) proposed the term “scriptotherapy” to follow in the tradition of the term, bibliotherapy. Scriptotherapy is defined as “the deliberate use of writing designed to enhance therapeutic outcomes” (1996, p.263). Riordan uses the

term to specifically describe the writing activities of the client that takes place within a counselling relationship. Regardless of context (i.e., counselling or self-help), client writing is intended to be a means of self-exploration with the intention of assisting in the resolution of a problematic issue or concern.

Alongside these definitions, a categorization of the various types of writing assignments has been put forward. In 1991, L'Abate proposed a classification system based on four different ways to structure a writing exercise. He placed them on a continuum ranging from least to most structured and labeled them as the following:

- A) *Open-ended* such as a diary or journal (i.e., "Write anything that comes into your head");
- B) *Focused* (i.e., "Write about your depression");
- C) *Guided* (i.e., "Here are some questions about depression that you need to answer");
- D) *Programmed*, consisting of a systematic series or a program of various lessons to be completed at home over a period of time, from a minimum of three weeks to as many as necessary to deal with whatever trouble-some problem or symptom is presented to the therapist (p.92).

The definitions and the classification system described have appeared relatively recently in the literature however publications on the uses of writing in clinical practice have appeared since the 1940's. One of the earliest descriptions of using client writing appeared in 1942 by psychologist Gordon Allport. In addition to Allport, Landsman (1951), Messiger (1952), and Farber (1953) all explored the domain of written

communication and wrote about its use in counselling. One of the first studies to examine client writing in therapy was conducted by Widroe and Davidson (1961). Their study involved 12 participants who began to incorporate writing into their treatment. The results of this early study showed benefit for these participants with the authors noting an important quality of using the written medium: it allowed participants to examine and re-examine (read and re-read) the wording and emotional content of their writing. The authors concluded that “writing outside the therapy hour aids verbal therapy so significantly as to alter the course of treatment”(p.110).

In 1965, following a symposium by the American Psychological Association entitled *The Use of Written Communication in Counseling and Psychotherapy*, Pearson compiled and edited a monograph. This monograph included papers from three prominent psychologists using the written medium in their practice. A common experience that emerged among them was how, almost by accident or unexpected circumstances, each started to use some form of writing (e.g., diaries, journals, letters, notebooks, etc.) with their clients. As Burton (1965) described, each clients’ written production is “an expressive and creative act” and it “both analyzes and synthesizes emotion in a deeply personal way”(p.14). The symposium and the publication of this monograph further legitimized the use of writing in psychotherapy and drew added attention to its potential therapeutic influence.

An opportunity noted by the authors in the monograph was the potential for research into this relatively uncharted area. In addressing this shortfall, Phillips and Wiener (1966) conducted a study examining the application of writing in therapy. The participants

involved in their study were university students attending the school's counselling centre. The participants were divided into four subject groups: a group that was involved in attending group psychotherapy, a second group who received individual counselling, a third group designated as receiving "writing therapy" (which involved communicating with the counsellor by means of writing only), and a fourth group which was the waitlist control group. The results of this study showed that the third group, those involved in writing only, improved the most based on pre and post testing on five different instruments. It is interesting to note that in this study, the "writing therapy" group had no physical or visual contact with the counsellors yet the act of writing about their concerns and emotions meet their needs. Of further note is that this study not only involved the clients using the written medium but the counsellors as well. It can be considered one of the first studies to explore counsellor-authored writing however this feature was not the primary focus of the investigators.

In the 1980's, social psychologist James Pennebaker, along with his associates, began a long relationship with the study of how writing affects peoples' health. His attention and investigations further legitimized the use of writing as a means of healing. The majority of his studies are well designed and he has published widely over the last two decades (e.g., Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Colder & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Collectively, his investigations confirm that client writing is beneficial both in terms of physical and mental health. In addition to Pennebaker, numerous others have conducted study and reviewed the use of writing (Greenhalgh, 1999; Lange, van der Wall & Emmelkamp,

2000; Lange, Barends & Ende, 1998; Smyth, 1998; Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz & Kaell, 1999). Their conclusions parallel Pennebaker's in that the writer, by involving themselves in a written exercise, improves both emotionally and physiologically. As many of these studies were conducted in structured, laboratory-type settings, Smyth and Helm (2003) note the importance of now moving this research to more natural settings and to the use of writing activities outside the therapeutic relationship and in the context of self-help.

Letters in Counselling

The words in a letter don't fade and disappear the way conversation does; they endure through time and space, bearing witness to the work of therapy and immortalizing it – David Epston

Letters can be considered one form of written communication used in counselling. They have been authored by both clients and counsellors for a variety of reasons.

Client-Authored Letters

There are numerous examples in the literature of the application of letter writing by clients. Overall, they have been used in couple and family therapy (Crago, 1997; Lange et.al., 2000; Nau, 1997; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; Rudes, 1992; Sloman & Pipitone, 1991); in individual counselling (Batiste, 1965; Diamond, 2000; Ellis, 1989; Hildebrandt, 1995; Lindahl, 1986; Penn, 1991; Rasmussen & Tomm, 1992; Torem, 1993; Wikler, 1986); and in group settings (Brouwers, 1994; Chen, Noosbond & Bruce, 1998; Tubman, Montgomery & Wagner, 2001; Zimmerman & Shepard, 1993). The specific application of letter writing by clients has been focused on writing to their partners, to their

counsellor, to family members and significant others in their lives, to loved ones who have died, to themselves, and to particular personified objects (food, drugs, alcohol, etc.). Many letters written by clients within the context of counselling are not sent but either held by the client or destroyed. The issues addressed in these letters include: grief, forgiveness, communication and generally, expressing personal thoughts and emotions.

Client-Counsellor Correspondence by Letter

Letters have also been used as a means of correspondence between a counsellor and client. One of the earliest descriptions of such a practice was by Alston (1957; as cited by Batiste, 1965). Alston was completing psychoanalysis with a female patient suffering from tuberculosis. Throughout the two years of treatment, approximately 800 letters were exchanged between Alston and his client. Another example is reported by France, Cadieax and Allen (1995). They describe the application of Morita therapy which involves the frequent exchange of letters between client and counsellor. They describe the approach as useful for those who are more introspective as well as those not able to attend counselling sessions on a regular basis. Hargens (2001) also described a case whereby he initiated correspondence with a client through letters. Following a difficult session, he felt confused and concerned about his client. He decided to compose a letter which in turn, facilitated a stronger relationship and resulted in an exchange of letters between them over an extended period of time.

Jacobs and Mack (1986) reported a case of receiving a letter from an individual who was in the middle of a suicidal crisis. The authors responded by writing a letter to the woman and her husband as well as to her local mental health centre. Approximately one

year later, the woman wrote a letter back indicating she had received help and expressed gratitude for the authors' letters. Jacobs and Mack (1986) felt the letter's influence related to the making of "an empathic connection at a distance"(p.93) and to reaching the patient where she was.

Two additional examples were found in the literature showing the use of letter writing correspondence. Schustov and Lester (1999) describe a letter writing service established in Ryazan, Russia. It encouraged people to write a letter about their concerns which would then be answered by a trained counsellor. Although no outcome studies have been performed, the authors describe the service as beneficial in a country where letter writing allows a more honest and open exchange than face-to-face communication. A second "letter service" is reported by Yeung, Chang and Chau (2003) in Hong Kong. Their service, entitled "Uncle Long Legs' Letter Box", allow children between the ages of 10 to 14 to write a letter to Uncle Long Legs. The intention is for the child to create "new meanings through writing letters"(p.40) with each letter being responded to by a trained counsellor. Similar to Schustov and Lester (1999), no formal research has been conducted evaluating the letter service although they indicate the correspondence that emerges between the child and the counsellor has been very helpful according to informal feedback from the children.

Counsellor-Authored Letters

Letters written by counsellors have varied in regards to their intentions but generally fall into two categories: administrative letters and therapeutic letters. Administrative letters relate more to "the initiation and maintenance of clinical engagement"(Steinberg,

2000, p.6) and for purposes of communicating with other professionals and agencies involved in the care of a client (Coles, 1995; du Plessis & Hirst, 1999; Lewis, Stokes & Bolton, 1991; Vidgen & Williams, 2001). Recently, there has been a growing recognition in the health care field of the importance of clients having a right to and receiving pertinent information related to their care. This appears to have increased the use of administrative-type letters that summarize a medical consultation (Baker, Eash, Schuette & Uhlmann, 2002; Gauthier, 1999; Pierides, 1999; Thomas, 1998).

Letters sent to clients with therapeutic intentions not only summarize the content of a session and perhaps note a future appointment, but are intended, through various means, to play an influencing role in the process of therapy. One of the first descriptions of writing a letter with such intentions was by Ellis (1965) who described writing “diagnostic-therapeutic letters”(p.27). To his surprise, he noted the recipients of his letters received “greater help from my letters than from their face to face therapeutic contacts”(p.27). Additionally, counsellor-authored letters with therapeutic intentions have taken the form of “emplotment”(Goldberg, 2000); they have also been used in Jungian counselling (Allan & Bertoia, 1992); for follow up after a difficult therapeutic termination (Omer, 1991); for engagement (Wilcoxon & Fennell, 1986; 1983); as a means of welcoming (Graham, 2003); and for paradoxical purposes (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata, 1978; Weeks & L’Abate, 1982).

Letters with therapeutic intentions have also been used in group counselling to foster post-group processing (Beck & Bosman-Clark, 1989). First described by Yalom, Brown and Bloch (1975), they found the “summary” letter to be highly valued by group

members and to stimulate group discussion and individual and group-as-a-whole development. Yalom et.al., (1975) also noted benefits for the counsellor including the reflective process required to write the letter. The letter also allowed a greater sense of transparency to emerge between the clients and group facilitators.

Letters, authored by counsellors and sent with therapeutic intentions, have recently seen an increase in use as an adjunct to counselling. The growth and creation of such letters have been cast in a new light by the influences of post-modernism. The post-modern wave (and the therapies that have their roots based in this movement, i.e., narrative therapy, solution-focused therapy, collaborative language systems) have impacted the field of counselling in general and more specifically, has brought emphases to language and multiple understandings to the practice of letter writing.

Modern and Postmodern Assumptions

The Modern age, which sounds as if it would last forever, is fast becoming a thing of the past. Industrialization is quickly giving way to Post-Industrialization, factory labour to home and office work – Charles Jencks

The word commonly used to describe this era is “postmodern” - a puzzling, uppity term, seeming to imply that the modern era, which we have always equated with all that is new and progressive, has reached the age of retirement – Walter Truett Anderson

The origins of modernism have been described as emerging from the Enlightenment age and is also associated with the period of Western industrialization (Pocock, 1995). The intention underlying modernism was to unravel the “truths” about the world and humanity thought to be held captive and awaiting to be discovered. Modernist thought follows a realist epistemological doctrine and invites us into an objective relationship

whereby we, as the knower, “can attain knowledge of an independent reality”(Held, 1995, p.4). This ability allows us to discover the “truth” of something or someone. In addition to this principal assumption of the modernist world view, Smith (1997), applying this logic to counselling, offers an additional six:

1. Theories and research about human behavior are comprehensively based on scientific methodology and anecdotal studies, and thus contain empirically verified “truth”.
2. This “truth” is objective, unbiased, and universal.
3. Therapists, by virtue of their specialized schooling and training in human behavior, are the best authorities on the causes of clients’ problems and on how to solve them.
4. Clients are much less familiar with the comprehensive body of scientific, objective knowledge. They also have various dysfunctions that distort, narrow, and bias their perceptions. Thus, whatever ideas clients have about their own lives and what to do about them are likely to be unreliable, biased, and suspect.
5. Young therapy clients tend to be more impulsive and less “rational” than adult clients, and are also likely to be unreliable authorities on their own lives.
6. Thus, therapists’ access to comprehensive, unbiased scientific research and objective psychological knowledge gives them superior ability to assess and solve clients’ (especially young clients’) problems . . . This

makes therapists the best authorities on clients' lives (p.9-10).

Compared to modernism, post-modernism shifts the focus from a single meta-narrative to multiple narratives (Kennedy, 1998). That is, the emergence of postmodernism challenged the assumption and supremacy of a single truth or that we could objectively know or discover this truth. As a movement, post-modernism has a foot in almost every academic discipline and over the past two decades, has strongly influenced the profession of counselling.

The subtle and not-so subtle emerging influence of postmodernism into counselling has been described by many in the literature (Doherty, 1991; Gergen, 1992; Legg & Stagaki, 2002; O'Hara & Anderson, 1991; Peavy, 1996; Shawver, 2001). In addition, Pare, in a seminal article in 1995, articulated the growing transformation in family therapy and the psychotherapy field in general, from a systems metaphor to a recognition that families and clients are "interpretative communities, or storying cultures"(p.2). Pare's description and encouragement of this process emerges from the privileging of local meaning and interpretation that is characteristic of postmodernism.

Freedman and Combs (1996), two prominent authors and practitioners of the narrative approach, expand on the elements of the postmodern worldview by describing four ideas they see as central to understanding the philosophy and practice of post-modernism. These include: 1. Realities are socially constructed; 2. Realities are constituted through language; 3. Realities are organized and maintained through narrative; and 4. There are no essential truths. Underlying each of their ideas is the view

that we can not know an objective reality as it is considered multi-faceted and dependent upon the interpreter. Furthermore, language and stories are seen as being able to promote diversity beyond the narrow and specific application of them in the modernist context.

Postmodernism has been embraced by numerous counsellors and many new and exciting approaches and techniques have resulted. It has brought forth valuable debate and discussion along with new conceptualizations of clients and client groups. Despite what postmodernism has brought to counselling, it has not escaped critical examination. Held (2000, 1995) provides a very thorough and critical review of postmodernism in counselling. The crux, as she describes, of why many therapists are “taking refuge in the postmodern humanities” (1995, p.15) relates to the longstanding issue of making psychotherapy both individualized and systemic or replicable. Held (1995) encourages clinicians not to fully embrace an anti-realist stance but suggests instead, a modest-realist approach. Others have suggested a “para-modern” approach (Larner, 1994); a “better story position” involving modern and postmodern stances (Pocock, 1995); an integrative third-order cybernetics (Dallas & Urry, 1999); and a synthesis between text and context (narrative and systemic metaphors) (Bertrando, 2000). Numerous others have critically reflected on postmodernism and the emerging therapies with tones of caution and concern (Amundson, 2001; Amundson, Webber & Stewart, 2000; Minuchin, 1991, 1998, 1999; Pilgrim, 2000; Smith, 1994; Stewart & Amundson, 1995).

Despite the polarization present in the literature at times, it appears many counsellors, in their day-to-day clinical practice, embrace and find benefit in both (modern and postmodern approaches) as Anderson and O'Hara (1995) describe:

Postmodernity does not mean that we have left the modern era behind.

It is all around us and within us. Most of us slip back and forth like bilingual children between postmodern, constructivist modes of thought in which we regard reality as socially constructed, and modern, objectivist modes of thought in which we regard reality as something that is nonhuman yet known (or at least potentially knowable) with unshakable certainty through some approach to truth – science, religion, history, psychotherapy. We cling to the hope that one or another of these approaches will explain everything for us and maybe even for everyone else as well. Both modern and postmodern, but never sure which, we also have hankerings for what we imagine were the simple joys of the premodern. (p.172-173).

Narrative Therapy: A Postmodern Approach

Narrative therapy involves much more than a new set of techniques. It represents a fundamental new direction in the therapeutic world – Bill O'Hanlon

Narrative therapy has been described as one of the “third wave” (O'Hanlon, 1994, p.23) approaches which has strongly influenced the field of psychotherapy. It has introduced a unique shift away from pathology-based models and has leveled the client-

counsellor relationship. Emerging from the work of White and Epston (1990), narrative therapy has grown with many clinicians sharing and expanding upon its practices (Bird, 2000; Freedman & Combs, 1996, 2002; Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997; Maisel, Epston & Borden, in press; Monk, Winslade, Crocket & Epston, 1997; Smith & Nylund, 1997; Winslade & Monk, 1999; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996).

The development of the theory and practice of narrative therapy is informed by numerous scholars of different traditions. The psychologist and anthropologist Gregory Bateson; sociologist and psychologist Jerome Bruner; ethnographer Edward Bruner; literary critic Jacques Derrida; and French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault all played roles and influenced the creation of what has come to be known as narrative therapy (Monk, 1998; Nylund & Nylund, 2003).

A principal understanding of narrative therapy is that people “live their lives according to stories” (Nylund & Nylund, 2003, p.388). People are involved in many stories simultaneously and in different contexts (e.g., within their family, friendships, work, church community, etc.). Each day, new stories are added, some are forgotten and others reinforced. Stories are established about how we view ourselves, our abilities and competencies, our struggles, relationships, desires, interests, achievements, and futures (Morgan, 2000). Meaning is attached to these stories moment by moment and a narrative of our lives is created and a dominant story emerges. As we live our lives, we privilege certain stories over others that seem to best fit with the plot of our dominant story. Often, the dominant story is characterized as limiting and disempowering as well as being filled with weakness and personal failure (White & Epston, 1990). The process of narrative

therapy is to help clients re-author their dominant story and allow a counter-plot to emerge (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Narrative therapy also consciously draws attention to the idea that stories do not occur in a vacuum but are influenced and manufactured in broader social, cultural, and political contexts (White & Epston, 1990). Morgan (2000) states, these contexts contribute “to the interpretations and meanings that we give to events” (p.9).

The initiation of the re-authoring process in narrative therapy begins by distancing the person from their identified problem. Situating their identity as separate from the problem opens up “conceptual space” (Tomm, 1989, p.54) and allows room for alternative stories to emerge and for a counter-plot to develop. This is achieved through the practice of having externalizing conversations. Externalizing has been widely described in the literature (Archer, 1997; Ball, Piercy & Bischof, 1993; Bitter, 2000; Doan, 1995; Dykes & Neville, 2000; Kinman, 1994; Prest & Carruthers, 1991; Roth & Epston, 1996; Shilts & Reiter, 2000; Silver, Williams, Worthington & Phillips, 1998). A central theme in describing the use of externalizing is that it has more value when incorporated as part of a postmodern philosophical stance than as a stand-alone technique. The significance of externalizing rests in the opportunities it provides to both the client and the counsellor to attend to events and experiences that run counter or challenge the problem or dominant story (Nylund & Nylund, 2003). These events and experiences have been described as “unique outcomes” or “sparkling moments”. As described by Freedman and Combs (1996), when people begin to explore further these moments and start to “live out the alternative stories, the results are beyond solving

problems” for “within the new stories, people live out new self-images, new possibilities for relationships and new futures”(p.16).

In addition to externalizing, narrative therapy involves the use of numerous practices in an attempt to draw out and deepen a client’s preferred story and expose and subvert the problem-saturated story. Some of these practices include: mapping out the impact of both the problem on the person and the person’s acts of resistance against the problem; deconstruction; re-membering conversations; rituals and celebrations; documentation (e.g., declarations and certificates); and outsider witness groups and definitional ceremonies (Russell & Carey, 2003; Carr, 1998; Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997; Henley, 1994; Monk, 1998; White & Epston, 1990). Alongside these practices, many counsellors have been intrigued and thus adopted, therapeutic letter writing as an adjunct to their counselling sessions.

Thickening the Story: Therapeutic Letters

Letters ought to be moving experiences, doorways through which everyone can enter the family’s story and be touched by the bravery, the pain and even the humor of the narrative – David Epston

As previously noted, the term “therapeutic letters” is attributed to narrative therapy and the work of White and Epston. In their landmark book, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (1990), they describe a number of different types of letters including: letters of invitation; redundancy letters; letters of prediction; counter-referral letters; letters of reference, letters for special occasions, brief letters; letters as narratives; and

self-story letters. Each type has slightly different intentions but contain similar elements (i.e., they review useful moments of the counselling session and provide opportunity for therapist reflections and questions) (Epston, 1994). Furthermore, as language and the construction of an alternative or preferred story is central in narrative therapy, each letter attempts to contribute to and magnify, the story. This is accomplished by the letters ability to concretely outline and curiously inquire in writing about those “sparkling moments” that are either “contradictory to the dominant story or stand as puzzling anomalies” (White & Epston, 1990, p.127).

White and Epston have continued to explore the use of therapeutic letters and have published subsequent works (Epston, 1994; White, 1995; White & Epston, 1992). Epston’s (1994) further experimentation and description of letters brought many counsellors to engage in the practice of letter writing. He emphasizes though, that letters should not be seen as a separate entity from a session. He eloquently describes the letters as being “organically intertwined” (p.33) with the counselling session and that they follow each other “like the drawing in and letting out of breathe” (p.33).

Epston and White also note numerous advantages of including letters in therapy (Epston, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). Principal among them is that due to the dialogical nature of a letter, it allows transparency and accountability to enter into the relationship with the client. The letters are a shared product visible to everyone and to which can be edited, changed or confirmed. Additionally, they allow opportunity to “salvage” and acknowledge counsellor mistakes and provide the private reading of words that may be

too painful to hear in a session. Numerous others have offered their reasons for writing a letter (Harper-Jackes & Masters, 1994; Shilts & Ray, 1991; White & Murray, 2002) however, Parry and Doan (1994) have succinctly summarized the many intentions and purposes into the following:

1. To ensure that the counsellor has heard the client's story accurately.
Letters give the client an opportunity to "edit the editor."
2. To give time to ponder cases outside the rapid fire atmosphere of therapeutic conversation.
3. To "extend" the effect of the therapy session and render it less likely that a client will "forget" the conversation.
4. To render a new story more "newsworthy" by documenting the various exceptions to the old story that surfaced during an interview.
5. To provide a written "double description" for a client that contrasts the old story with the new story.
6. To expand upon the therapist/client relationship. (p.167-168).

In reviewing the literature, many counsellors and academics have described the use of therapeutic letters (Andrews & Clark, 1993; Andrews, Clark & Baird, 1997; Batha, 2003; Davidson & Birmingham, 2001; Fishel, Buchs, McSheffrey & Murphy, 2001; Harper-Jaques & Masters, 1994; Kennedy, 1995; Lown & Britton, 1991; MacDonald, 2003; Majchrzak-Rombach, 2003; Marner, 2000; 1995; Nunnally &

Lipchik, 1989; Pare & Majchrzak-Rombach, 2003; Roberts & Epston, 1994; Shilts & Ray, 1991; White & Murray, 2002; Wojcik & Iverson, 1989; Wood & Uhl, 1988). Their descriptions of the application of letters in counselling practice are predominantly clinically based and anecdotal.

Many of these authors have noted the flexibility inherent in a letter in relation to its form (i.e., it can be brief, it can be long and full of description of the client's story, it can be for the purpose of involving a client into the process, etc.) As well, frequent mention has been made as to the letters value as a reflective tool for the counsellor. Although some of these letters are written by a clinical team (Fishel et. al., 2001; Levac, McLean, Wright, Bell, 'Anne' & 'Fred', 1998; Wright & Simpson, 1991), the composition of a letter allows the counsellor an intimate opportunity to review both the content and process of a session. Epston (2003) described this process and act as a 'one person reflecting team'. In addition to the counsellor's contemplation, the act of reading (and re-reading) by the client also gives them opportunity to reflect and allows a sense of personal agency to extend "over all aspects of the therapy since they are the ultimate editors of the letter" (Majchrzak-Rombach, 2003, p.16).

Research on Therapeutic Letters

Despite the apparent attraction to narrative therapy, research on its utility is sparse – Mary Etchison & David M. Kleist

Despite the recent interest in letter writing and its growth and visibility in the literature, a clear paucity exists in relation to formal research. Further review of the

literature uncovered four studies of therapeutic letters with two being informally based and two emerging from academic dissertations.

In 1994, Nylund and Thomas conducted a survey with 40 clients to determine the impact of the therapeutic letter they had received. From their brief questionnaire, results showed 37 participants indicated the letter was “very helpful” and 3 considered them “helpful” (in a range from very helpful, helpful, not helpful, and harmful). They determined the average worth of a letter was 3.2 face-to-face interviews (in a range of 2.5 to 10) and 52.8 per cent of the gains made in therapy (if 100% was total positive outcome) were due to the letters alone. The authors also invited written feedback to which participants noted that they were impressed that their counsellor wrote them a letter and also indicated they used the letter to remind them of the gains they had made.

In an informal research project, Epston (cited in White, 1995) posed two questions to clients. These questions related to how many sessions they thought a letter was worth and what percentage of outcome they would attribute to the letter (if 100% was whatever positive outcomes resulted from the therapy process). His findings showed an average response of 4.5 in regards to how many sessions a letter was worth and a range of 40 to 90 per cent for total positive outcome of therapy.

Whyte (1997), in an unpublished master’s thesis, focused on a structured summary letter format as an adjunctive intervention. Six clients and six therapists were chosen to participate with the clients receiving four consecutive letter summaries after each session. The letters’ theoretical base was informed by the narrative approach and they were constructed using pre-established narrative summary guidelines (i.e., therapists followed

a formula to construct the letters). The structure followed the format described by Nylund and Thomas (1994). Each client was interviewed following the fourth letter and the 6 therapists completed a 12-page questionnaire about their experiences and opinions of the summary letter. The general findings of this study found that both the therapists and clients found the letters to be therapeutically helpful and a useful adjunct to verbal discussions.

Moules' (2000) doctoral dissertation is perhaps the most extensive study of therapeutic letters. Her dissertation was a hermeneutic inquiry exploring eleven letters. Textual interpretations of the letters were coupled with interviews with the families and the clinicians who wrote the letters. This study was conducted at the Family Nursing Unit (FNU) at the University of Calgary. This Unit offers a specialized service based on family systems nursing and they work with a variety of clients who are experiencing health related issues. The letters that were studied were sent to clients who sought consultation from this Unit. A reflecting team format was used for the consultations with the letters generally being written by the primary clinician however they were signed on behalf of the clinical team.

Generally, Moules found the letters to be a useful and significant component of the counselling process at the FNU. She described the concept of an "intersection" (p.199) that emerged in the study. This idea relates to the entwined nature of the intended meaning of a letter and the way the letter is interpreted or understood by a client. Moules put forward that the heart of the influence or workings of a letter is found in the clinical intentions and meaning associated with the letter and in the "ways that the recipients

allow the letters to enter, inform, invoke, influence, and change them in some way” (p.199). Moules (2002, 2003) has further disseminated her findings in the literature and has encouraged clinicians to take up letter writing with a conscious recognition and understanding as to the potency of the words that lie within a letter.

This chapter has reviewed letters and letter writing from a historical perspective to its current use in counselling. Letters, as a form of written communication, have been an adjunct in counselling for a number of years however they have recently been reconceptualized through postmodernism and narrative therapy.

The developing growth and base of knowledge about therapeutic letters is encouraging and demonstrates the interest in this intervention and how it may benefit clients. Although there has been much anecdotal support for therapeutic letters, formal research is just beginning to confirm and more extensively map out this technique. Further analysis is still needed particularly in the area of gaining a greater understanding of how clients experience and receive these letters and how meaningful they are to the therapeutic process.

CHAPTER 3:

Methodology

Introduction

The impetus to commence and complete this project emerged from a personal and professional interest in counselling research and more specifically, a desire to gain a greater understanding of narrative therapy and the place therapeutic letters hold in clients' lives. Marshall and Rossman (1999) adeptly describe how curiosity in research frequently comes from "real-world observations, emerging from the interplay of the researcher's direct experience, . . . interests in practice, and growing scholarly interests" (p.25). As a counsellor working in the mental health field, letter writing has been a part of this researcher's counselling practice. Being able to bring this experience and formally explore it through a research project brought a deeper understanding of not only letter writing, but also of the practitioner-researcher role (McLeod, 1999).

A number of studies have outlined the view that research is of limited value and relevance in a counsellor's day-to-day practice (Cohen, Sargent & Sechrest, 1986; Morrow-Bradley & Elliott, 1986). Barker, Pistrang and Elliott (1994) suggest numerous reasons for this view including: The lack of clinical utility of most research studies; the heavy emphasis on nomothetic rather than idiographic approaches; the time commitments required to undertake research; and the limited support frequently offered by supervisors and managers. Despite these reasons, McLeod (1999), an advocate of the practitioner-researcher model, suggests that practitioners of therapy "should take more responsibility

for the knowledge base of their profession” (p.203). It is this notion that underlies the design, analysis and sharing of the findings of this research project.

Research Methodology

Researchers’ beliefs about reality, knowledge, and values frequently serve as points of departure in the designing of a research study (Rothe, 1994). Underlying this researcher’s approach to counselling are the ideas of collaboration, of multiple and contextualized understandings, pragmatics, and respect. These elements parallel the researcher’s view of research and influenced the selection of the topic, research question and the choice of a qualitative framework.

Historically, social science research has been dominated by traditional quantitative methods (Berg, 2001; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Despite this commanding influence, qualitative approaches have ascended in recent years to a level of respect and utility, albeit tentative at times (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Huberman & Miles, 2002; Kvale, 1996). This growth seems to have emerged from a shift in emphasis on positivist philosophy to a more pluralistic understanding of the humanities.

Positivism, emerging from the philosopher Auguste Comte, involves a belief in observable facts and the possibility that they can be correctly identified and quantified (Barker, Pistrang & Elliot, 2002). The identification or research process is about establishing objective knowledge and the refining of “perfectible”(Morrow & Smith, 2000, p.202) methods so as to get closer to this knowledge. Quantitative research, with its emphasis on measurement and statistical methods, is captured within the positivist

paradigm. At the same time however, quantitative research has grown beyond the rigid boundaries and conceptualizations put forth by positivism. Though positivism has a long history, Willig (2001) reports, “few, if any, scientists and researchers today claim to be unreconstructed positivists” (p.3). The growing movement that our understanding of the world is “partial at best”(Willig, 2001,p.3) seems to have shifted the focus to the concept of a continuum in relation to how close we can come to objective knowledge. The assortment of ways to understand the world moves from naïve realism to extreme relativism with various versions of critical realism and social constructionism meeting and mixing in the middle (Willig, 2001).

Qualitative research, following a more interpretive paradigm, is generally an inductive process that assumes “meanings are multiple and diverse and that the social world is complex and contingent” (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p.201). It can be differentiated from more traditional realist positions in this regard however, qualitative methods can be applied widely regardless of the researcher’s epistemological stance. Furthermore, qualitative research concentrates more on language and observation with data being presented in words and description rather than numbers. Words hold significant value in qualitative research as the focus is not on producing claims in relation to a substantial number of individuals but rather to a small group. The literature contrasts these and describes the former as nomothetic and the latter as idiographic (Barker, et.al., 2002; Brandell & Varkas, 2001; Morrow & Smith, 2000).

Within the domain of counselling, the allied disciplines that engage in the practice of therapy (i.e., clinical and counselling psychology, clinical social work) have challenged the dominant scientific and nomothetic approaches to research and in varying degrees, have begun to acquaint themselves more intimately with the qualitative approach (Barker et.al., 1994; McLeod, 1999; Thyer, 2001; Tutty, Rothery & Grinnell, 1996; Sherman & Reid, 1994; Willig, 2001).

In the discipline of psychology, many maintain the view that research and the approaches used, should reflect hard science (Kazdin, 1999). Others have questioned and invited dialogue in relation to the traditional linear conceptualization and construction of research in psychology (O'Neil, 2002; Rennie, 2002; Rennie, Watson & Monteiro; 2002). Within counselling psychology, Morrow and Smith (2000) have noted that for over 20 years, researchers have inquired and encouraged a broadening of the methodological repertoire used in the field. They describe the growing acceptance of qualitative research by noting the increasing number of qualitatively-based articles being published in peer-reviewed journals. The expanding methodology, as Morrow and Smith (2000) state, "mirrors the growing pluralism in the theories and practices of counseling psychology as a whole" (p.199).

In this study, the decision to use a qualitative framework was based primarily on the nature of the research topic and question. The question that was created sought responses based on personal experience and meaning. In this regard, a qualitative approach seemed most appropriate due to its ability to capture the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the participants. Although a quantitative approach could have addressed the research

question in part (e.g., On a scale of one to ten, how valuable were these letters to you?), the complexity and intricacy of the participants experiences would have been left, for the most part, dormant.

Research into therapeutic letters and narrative therapy overall, is limited. In reviewing potential reasons for this, Etchison and Kleist (2000) describe that traditional research methods are essentially predicated on a number of assumptions that run counter to the postmodern and language-based approach of narrative therapy. The result is a restricted empirical focus on this and other postmodern therapeutic systems. Etchison and Kleist (2000) go on to describe however, the potential research opportunities afforded to narrative therapy through qualitative approaches. As both (narrative therapy and qualitative research) involve the mutual exploration and understanding of experience, they report and encourage the use of qualitative methods as “they are particularly suited to researching the effectiveness of narrative therapy” (p.65).

Research Design

The design of this study centers on letters. Using letters as the centerpiece in the construction of this study seemed a logical decision for a variety of reasons. First, prior formal research on therapeutic letters (Moules, 2000; Whyte, 1997) used interviews as the principal means of collecting data. As such, the concept of having clients write about their experiences of receiving a therapeutic letter has yet to be explored. Secondly, collecting data by use of letters allowed counsellors and their clients from across Canada to participate in this study. Thirdly, the value and potency of the written word has been

acknowledged and thus, having participants use this medium, the researcher is able to capture the unique way their thoughts, feelings, and experiences were expressed. A final reason relates to the exceptional opportunity it provided the study to maintain a consistent form throughout the project.

The research population in this study involved two groups, counsellors and their clients. Although the clients are the central focus, the counsellors were the starting point for this project. The selection procedures for identifying counsellors involved a criteria-based approach as well as a network or snowball format (Creswell, 1998; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The criteria counsellors needed to meet included: having previously written and sent letters to their clients in the process of counselling; the letters sent had therapeutic intentions; and they had to be registered or chartered with a professional licensing body (e.g., their local provincial association or college of social work or psychology; the Canadian Counselling Association; etc.). Network or snowball selection was also used in the identification of counsellors. This method was chosen as it is “useful in situations where the individuals investigated are scattered throughout populations and form no naturally bounded, common group” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p.74). A number of counsellors were contacted initially with further counsellors emerging following contact with this first group.

A meeting was arranged with those counsellors who had expressed an interest, met the criteria, and were locally based. Each counsellor received a Letter of Invitation (Appendix C), and a Consent Form (Appendix D). Counsellors were also given a two

page questionnaire (Appendix B) to complete which addressed their clinical and academic background as well as their practice of using therapeutic letters. Those counsellors not locally based were mailed the letters of invitation, consent forms, and questionnaires with additional contact being completed via email.

At this stage, counsellors then discerned and selected two or three clients to whom they had previously wrote and sent a therapeutic letter(s) to. The selection of clients was generally left to the counsellor however, five guidelines were suggested to assist in this process. These included:

1. Select current clients active on their caseload and secondly, those who have recently concluded counselling.
2. Consider a range of clients (e.g., children, adolescents, adults, families and couples).
3. If children are selected, ensure they are over the age of 8 years.
4. Exclude clients with serious mental health diagnoses (e.g., schizophrenia).
5. Although the presenting concerns and issues of the client(s) are not significant, those who have counselling issues that may make them vulnerable to significant emotional distress if they participate in the study, should be excluded.

Once the counsellor selected a client(s) that met the above guidelines and whom they felt were an appropriate candidate for the study, they were then contacted by the counsellor either by phone or in person. At this time, the study and its purpose was

introduced to them. A central message that was communicated to clients was that whether they went on to participate or not, there would be no disruption in their counselling services nor their relationship with their counsellor. Each client was given a Participant Information Package to take home for further consideration. Each package included a Letter of Invitation (Appendix E), two consent forms (Appendix F) and two self-addressed stamped envelopes. One of the envelopes was used to return the consent form and the other (an Express Post envelope), was used to return the letter they wrote to the researcher.

This study attempted to explore the experiences and meaning of therapeutic letters in a range of clients in relation to age. In order to address the unique and different ways clients needed to be invited to participate and understand what their consent to participate would mean, three different participant packages were developed. Packages were first developed for families and adult individual clients. The difference between these two was minimal with the only change being the inclusion of the term “family” when describing the impact of the letter. A package was also developed for children and adolescents. For this group, a Letter of Invitation was created (Appendix I), a Consent Form (Appendix J), along with a parent or guardian Letter of Invitation (Appendix G) and Consent Form (Appendix H). The child or adolescent and parent were informed in the Letter of Invitation that both parties needed to consent in order for them to participate.

In summary, this study identified counsellors who used therapeutic letters in their practice via a network approach. These counsellors were then asked to identify clients

whom they had sent letters to. These clients were then asked to write the researcher a letter detailing their experience and understanding of having received a therapeutic letter.

Ethical Considerations

Deliberation and examination of ethical issues is a process common in the construction of research designs across academic disciplines. In conducting research related to counselling however, there emerges a number of unique issues and problems distinct to this specialty (Remley & Herlihy, 2001; Robson, Cook, Hunt, Alred & Robson, 2000). Principal among these are the possibility of psychological discomfort and to the recognition and protection of the intimate and fiduciary relationship between a client and their therapist.

The professions primarily engaged in clinical work all have incorporated guidelines for researchers in their Codes of Ethics in an attempt to address these concerns. The Canadian Counselling Association dedicates a full section in their *Code of Ethics* (Canadian Counselling Association, 1999) around the counsellors involvement in research. Emphasis is placed upon due care to participants and that “counsellors are responsible for protecting the welfare of their research subjects during research” (Standard E.2). The *Code* also draws specific attention and offers guidance in relation to the voluntary participation of clients (Standard E.4), to informed consent (Standard E.5), and to the protection of participants’ privacy and confidentiality (Standard E.6).

The *Social Work Code of Ethics* (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 1994) and the *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists* (Canadian Psychological Association,

2000) do not distinguish a separate section for research as does the *Code of Ethics* for the Canadian Counselling Association. Instead, their *Codes* focus on ten ethical obligations and responsibilities (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 1994) and four weighted principles (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000). Throughout these different dimensions of ethical practices, both *Codes* comment on and offer guidance in conducting research. Similar to the Canadian Counselling Association's *Code*, attention is placed upon safeguarding participant dignity (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000, Principle I, Subsection 8) and ensuring fully informed and ongoing consent (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 1994, Section 9, Subsection 5).

Within this study, significant consideration was undertaken by the researcher and supervisors so as to create a transparent and accountable framework for the planning, implementation and dissemination of results (McLeod, 1994). Reflecting on the above *Codes* and their similar guidelines for researcher conduct and participant protection, two particular concerns arose in this study which warranted further analysis. This included the initial contact of clients from their counsellors and the possibility of emotional discomfort during the composition of their letter to the researcher.

The theme of power pervades the counselling relationship regardless of whether clinicians acknowledge it or not (Amundson, Stewart & Valentine, 1993). Therapists, by nature of their position, are granted a sense of authority however this does not necessarily translate into practices that play on this imbalance. Many practitioners, following the philosophy and ideas of post-modernism and social constructionism, have acknowledged this power and have attempted to deconstruct it and encourage more transparency and

leveling of the client-counsellor relationship (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). Regardless of how it is conceptualized though, the existence of power and coercion could potentially compromise the true voluntary participation required in counselling research. A possibility exists in this study that some clients may feel compelled to participate due to the introduction of the study coming from their counsellor.

In examining this concern, the Interdisciplinary Committee for Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) at Memorial University provided guidance to this research project. Although this researcher believes the counsellors involved in this study approached their clients appropriately, there is the possibility of an unspoken influence that the clients may feel. With the ICEHR's input, it was decided, as described previously, to provide counsellors with guidelines in their selection of clients as well as how they approached them. Furthermore, giving clients the Information Package encouraged them to contemplate further their potential participation away from their counsellor. A central message left with clients was that it will be their decision whether or not they participate and whether or not they desire to share this decision with their counsellor. Although this added an element of uncertainty to the study as the researcher was not aware of the specific clients who had received packages, it seemed to be the most appropriate and respectful way to invite participants while safeguarding the elements of voluntary participation and their confidentiality.

The second area needing additional planning in this study was the potential for participant harm. As Remley and Herlihy (2001) state, "although counseling research rarely poses physical risks, there may be psychological risks because participation can

cause discomfort, stress, anxiety, or distress” (p.278). In this study, the probability of harm can be considered low however provisions were established for participants should they experience discomfort. Due to the distance involved with some participants and that an established relationship was already present between client and counsellor, additional support, if needed, was to be provided by their therapist. The counsellor was made aware of this potential responsibility through their letter of invitation and consent form. Clients were also informed of this option through their letter of invitation.

Although the literature surrounding “ethical issues in counselling and psychology research is sparse”(McLeod, 1994, p.175), the design of this study and the consideration given to ethics, was shaped and influenced by the codes of ethics reviewed above and the criteria set forth by the Tri-Council Policy Statement of Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (1998). This study, after being thoroughly reviewed and refined, received approval from the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University in March of 2003.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is central to any qualitative approach regardless of whether their presence is sustained or brief (LeCompte & Priessle, 1993; Marshall & Rossman, 1998). As well, the researcher is seen as an “instrument” (Morrow & Smith, 2000,p.201) and thus subjectivity is considered inevitable. Within this chapter, this researcher has described being a practicing counsellor who has engaged in therapeutic letter writing. This involvement and the client’s reactions to these letters influenced and encouraged the

decision to explore this adjunctive technique for a Master's thesis. The researcher's subjectivity was acknowledged from the commencement of this project and brought to the fore and analyzed continuously through interviews with the researcher's supervisors.

Reflecting on the significance of researchers' prior knowledge, Seidman (1998) emphasizes and warns that researchers should not approach the reading of data with a set of pre-established categories for which excerpts are sought. Instead, researchers must attend to the data "with an open attitude, seeking what emerges as important and of interest from the text" (Seidman, 1998, p. 100). Entering this project with a level of theoretical and practical knowledge coupled with the opportunity to openly examine this, allowed the researcher to approach this study with both an "informed and open mind" (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p.201).

Data Analysis

The analysis of data is described as a way of organizing and interpreting what has been collected (Glesne, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In qualitative research, it can be considered a "custom built" (Creswell, 1998, p.142) process as it is dynamic, creative and uniquely fitted to the particular study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Despite the inherent 'uniqueness' of qualitative data analysis, Franklin and Ballan (2001) accentuate the importance of utilizing a consistent analytic approach to the collection and interpretation of data.

In his 1994 article on therapeutic letters, Epston introduced the analogy of "breathing" in relation to the process of letter writing. In discerning an approach for the

analysis of the letters in this study, this concept proved to be beneficial. The idea of letting the participants' letters "breathe" and speak for themselves meant adopting methods sensitive to the written word. The result was the development of an analytical process emerging from the collaboration of Creswell (1998), Taylor and Bogdan (1998) and Seidman (1999). A discussion of these approaches and why they were selected for this study will be presented followed by a description of the analysis process used to gain answers to the research question.

Creswell (1998) identifies data analysis as conforming to a general contour. This contour, he states, "is best represented in a spiral image, a data analysis spiral" (p.142). Establishing a spiral image for this process captures the dynamic movement of analyzing data and the refining of interpretations. Instead of using a rigid, linear approach, Creswell (1998) emphasizes that qualitative researchers tend to move in analytic circles. Through his analysis spiral, one enters with the data of text and exits with a narrative or an account. The 'in-between' is comprised of "several facets of analysis" (p.142) to which the researcher circles through.

Creswell's (1998) approach was selected as an overall framework for this study as it provided the researcher a visual map of an analytical process. It also conceptualizes and strongly encourages a back and forth movement to data analysis. This emphasis corresponds well to the inherent reading and re-reading that takes place when one composes and receives a letter. Furthermore, Creswell's (1998) analysis spiral has a generic tone which permits flexibility and allows for the incorporation of other analysis

processes. To further deepen the analysis of the letters in this study, Taylor and Bogdan's (1998) and Seidman's (1998) approaches were woven into the process.

Taylor and Bogdan's (1998) approach to data analysis concentrates on developing "in-depth understanding" (p.140) of the people and issues under study. The processes they describe are analogous to that of Glaser & Strauss (1967) and the grounded theory method. In grounded theory, the insights and interpretations that emerge are 'grounded' in and arise from, the data. The principal focus in grounded theory is the development of a set of theoretical propositions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) which is where Taylor and Bogdan (1998) depart slightly. In differentiating themselves, they place greater emphasis on "understanding the settings or people on their own terms" and less on "developing concepts and theories"(p.140). They identify a number of distinct phases in data analysis which in this study, was incorporated into Creswell's (1998) framework.

Taylor and Bogdan's (1998) approach to data analysis added detail and refinement to the deconstruction of the letters. As well, the area of therapeutic letters has received very little research attention. As such, incorporating Taylor and Bogdan's (1998) approach allowed more description to emerge rather than an emphasis on theory construction. As Whyte (1997) also notes, due to the limited formal research, it seems this is a more appropriate goal at this time in relation to investigating clients' experiences of therapeutic letters.

Seidman's (1998) contribution is centered around the arrangement of the excerpts into categories. From this position he states, "the researcher then searches for connecting threads and patterns among the excerpts within those categories and for connections

between the various categories that might be called themes” (p.107). The excerpts are then thematically organized, presented, and commented upon by the researcher. In this study, the excerpts emerged from the letters sent to the researcher and were ultimately organized into four themes.

Seidman’s (1998) approach, like Taylor and Bogdan (1998), enhanced and provided further definition to the analysis process of the letters. Gathering the descriptive data around themes brought coherence and organization while still allowing the letters and the words spoken by the participants, to breathe and inform the researcher.

The process of data analysis commenced with the organizing of the data or the letters that arrived at the researcher’s door. Frequently in qualitative research, the amount of data collected through participant interviews and observations is substantial and requires immediate organizing into file folders or computer files (Creswell, 1998; Seidman, 1998). By the nature of this study, a voluminous amount of data was not generated. Despite this, each letter was placed in a separate file folder with the consent form of the author attached with it. Each letter that arrived was also given a label (e.g., Letter A; Letter B; etc.) to assist in referencing and analyzing.

The next step following the initial arrangement of the letters was the immersion or ‘discovery’ phase as noted by Taylor and Bogdan (1998). The initial step in this process, as recommended by Creswell (1998), was the reading of each letter as a whole before breaking it into parts. Understanding the “gestalt” of each letter enabled a greater understanding and appreciation for the context the participant was writing from. As well, numerous participants described the circumstances surrounding the contact with their

counsellor prior to writing about the value of the letter(s) in their life. Each letter that arrived was opened and read and re-read without interruption or without the noting or marking of any words or passages. Creswell's (1998) suggestion to commence analysis in this manner also fit with the spirit, tradition, and natural progression of receiving and reading a letter. That is, when we receive a personal letter, we do not immediately deconstruct it but rather let the words flow as we anticipate what the author will share with us next. Following the initial reading, we are intrigued and invited into a deeper relationship with what is written and how it is written.

Following the initial reading of the letters, the analysis moved to the identification of meaningful words and passages within each letter (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Seidman, 1998). This step involved the thorough reading and re-reading of each letter while making note of significant passages. Seidman (1998) describes this as a difficult step as there is no "model matrix" (p.101) that can be applied. Furthermore, this process involves the letting go of pieces of the text. Due to the value and implications of highlighting certain passages and leaving others, Seidman (1998) encourages researchers to make explicit or to articulate their criteria in identifying excerpts. In this study, the terms "reactions", "sentiments", and "situations" assisted in this process as the letters were assiduously read. These terms evolved out of the research question and the desire to explore the meaning and value in relation to how the letter(s) influenced their lives, their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Taylor and Bogdan (1998) recommend that researchers become intimately familiar with their data and that it should be examined "in as many ways as possible" (p.130). To

further this stage of analysis and due to the manageable volume of data, each letter received was re-written word by word by the researcher. Additional space was left so further comments and marking could be made.

The next step in the analysis process of the letters was the development of categories. This component of data analysis, described by Marshall and Rossman (1999), “is the most difficult, complex, ambiguous, creative and fun” (p.154). Creswell (1998) also sees the formation of categories as essential and states that it “represents the heart of qualitative data analysis” (p.144). The ideas put forth by Taylor and Bogdan (1998) and Seidman (1998) for generating categories was implemented and incorporated into Creswell’s (1998) framework. As noted, this collaboration worked well as the letters and the categories that emerged, were analyzed continuously, simultaneously, and consecutively in accordance with Creswell’s (1998) circular emphasis.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) note that categories “become buckets or baskets into which segments of the text are placed” (p.154). These “baskets” were kept tentative and a number of them collapsed into one another throughout analysis (Seidman, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). A number of categories were initially developed however these were then “probed for subcategories and sub-categories” (Glesne, 1999, p.143) until categorization was fully mapped. This process resulted in eight categories being established. These included: context of therapy; behavioral reactions; unique characteristics; use of the letter; affective responses; letter components; affective characteristics of the letter; and author history.

Following the marking and noting of words and passages and the establishment of categories, the analysis process moved to the study of the categories “for thematic connections within and among them” (Seidman, 1998, p.102). Rowan (1981; as cited by Seidman, 1998) refers to this as a more “dialectical” (p.134) process whereby the participants have spoken and now it is the researchers opportunity to respond to their words. This culminated into the development of four themes. Each of the themes were brought to the researcher’s supervisors for further review and analysis. The four themes included: Curiosity and Connection; Solidification: Relationships and Session Content; Facilitating and Hindering; and In Perpetuity: The Lasting and Tangible Presence of Letters.

Although not originally included in the design of this research, the researcher (after receiving the letters from participants) wrote a letter back to three of the participants. These participants were interested in further correspondence with the researcher. A letter was written to each of them as a way to confirm and further understand their experience of the therapeutic letter(s) they received. Due to time factors, only one of the participants was able to contribute a second letter.

This research claims to be a credible account of only the views of the selected population and sample. The findings in this study are bounded to the context in which it was conducted and thus limits are placed on generalizability. Unlike conventional quantitative research, this study offers the audience the opportunity to decide “how the findings may transfer to another context” (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p.200).

CHAPTER 4

Results

This chapter describes the findings from the letters written by the participants and the questionnaires completed by the counsellors in this study. Counsellor demographics and the data that emerged from the questionnaire will be presented first, followed with the findings from the participants' letters. The results described in this chapter provide insight into the writing practices of a selected number of counsellors and more importantly, how their clients understood and used the letters that were sent to them.

Counsellor Demographic Information

A total of 16 counsellors from across Canada were contacted in regards to participating in this study. Of the 16, nine consented to participate with each meeting the established criteria for this study. There were seven female and two male counsellors. Each counsellor held a minimum of a Masters degree with six being a Master's of Social Work, one being a Master of Arts (Psychology) degree. Two counsellors had trained at the doctoral level with one having a Ph.D. while the other was a Doctor of Psychology candidate. The titles noted by the counsellors included: Social Worker, Clinician, Mental Health Clinician, Family Therapist, and Clinical Psychologist. Each counsellor was actively practicing with their place of employment falling under one of the following categories: School Board, Community Agency, Health Care, and Private Practice.

The nine counsellors had an average of twenty-four years experience within a range of nine to thirty-eight years. The theoretical orientation of the counsellors was predominantly narrative and/or solution-oriented. One of the counsellors described their approach as integrative including elements of existential, psychodynamic, behavioral and spiritual approaches. Four counsellors, in addition to being primarily narrative or solution-oriented, noted influences from structural family therapy, Bowen, cognitive-behavioral, and systems theory. Each counsellor was registered through a licensing body. Six counsellors were Registered Social Workers with their local provincial association; two were Registered Psychologists; and one was registered with the Canadian Counselling Association. Two counsellors were also clinical members of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy.

The average number of years that a counsellor had been engaged in letter writing was 5.6 within a range of 2 to 10 years. The average number of letters sent to a client was 1.9 with 5 of the counsellors indicating that they usually send one. Four of the counsellors noted they generally send between 2 to 6 letters when working with a family or an individual client.

Counsellors' Conceptualization of Therapeutic Letters

The brief questionnaire (Appendix B) completed by each counselor allowed a glimpse into their letter writing practices. The data that emerged from these questionnaires were analyzed in relation to:

1. What are the factors that determine whether or not a letter is sent?;

2. What are the intentions of the letter?; and
3. What important elements should be in a therapeutic letter?

The following discussion will explore each of these questions in turn. Counsellors have been given fictitious names to protect their identity and any editing of their comments by the researcher have been placed in solid brackets.

Determining Factors in the Decision to Send a Therapeutic Letter

There were five factors that influenced whether or not a counsellor composed and sent a letter. The first was that the letter was an established component of a consultation or reflecting team session. Counsellors reported that a letter was often sent to an individual client or family following each session and that this was a routine part of the therapeutic process. As Klaudia, a counsellor in this study, described: “All Narrative Family Therapy clients receive a letter following each session, written by the two co-therapists of the session.”

A second factor that played a role in the decision to write a letter was uncertainty. This uncertainty was related to the client’s goals, the relationship between the counsellor and client, as well as a general feeling (by the counsellor) of being “stuck.” Counsellors described using the letter as a way to ask questions to gain clarity around these issues and to further facilitate “joining” with a client. Avigail, one of the counsellors in the study, described using the letter at times for this purpose. She noted that “some clients respond very positively to the extra interest” shown by a letter.

The third factor that guided the decision to send a letter involved the counsellor's clinical sense and judgment that it would be helpful in the therapeutic process. This was identified as a way of offering additional support and accentuating the client's strengths and therapy gains. As Avigail wrote, she often sends a letter "when I think having 'an extra voice' (input) might be helpful between sessions." A number of counsellors noted that they frequently composed a therapeutic letter when they felt the need to reinforce or underline the work done by a client. Naomi wrote of using the letter to "emphasize strengths" that have not only been noticed by her, but also the client and significant others involved in the client's life. As Thomas also wrote, he often composes a letter to "further a client's sense of personal agency."

The fourth determining factor in sending a letter related to the constraints of time. As Chloe wrote, "letters take some time." She went on to describe further the clinical reality faced by many counsellors:

There was a time when I was able to limit my caseload and write letters to everyone I saw. Caseloads got heavier from time to time and I've become more selective. Presenting problem may help make decision as, for example, in families where parents are asking for an ADHD assessment. I may not use letters esp. when I'm coordinating other services like pediatric consults, psychiatric consults etc. [for] the family. I think these families can still use therapeutic letters but I just don't have the time.

Thomas also wrote “I think a letter [is] useful in all situations but don’t always send them.” Although counsellors reported that the more letters they wrote, the more efficient the process became, the charts can still “pile up” as Chole described, while composing a letter to a client.

Counsellors also described how reaching the termination phase of therapy might determine the use of a therapeutic letter. This fifth and final factor was described by two counsellors, Kimberly and Fionna, who regularly sent letters at the end of counselling. These letters were used as a way to summarize and close the relationship. The letter also provided an opportunity to succinctly reflect and in a way, honor, the work that had been done.

The Intentions of a Letter

The second major area explored in the counsellor questionnaire related to the previous section however it addressed specifically, the intentions the counsellors had in sending a letter. Their responses were analyzed and two principal objectives or intentions emerged.

First, counsellors’ intentions related to emphasizing and highlighting the client’s story and moments of strength. By this, they intended to bring focused attention to meaningful moments in the client’s life and to the gains that have been made in therapy. As Naomi wrote, “I want the client to reflect and hold in their hand ‘written’ validation of what is happening, . . . something they can pullout to remind them of goals, strengths.” Counsellors desired the letter to stimulate the client’s or family’s thinking about their situation and the directions they would like therapy to go.

Furthermore, as Avigail wrote, letters allow an opportunity to “reinforce points covered in a counselling session.” Following in the narrative tradition, Kendall described the letter as a way to “encourage the continuation of [the] alternate story which emerged in-session.” In the same spirit, Thomas wrote of the letter’s ability to “reinforce the externalization of a problem.” In a more pragmatic way, the letter provided a vehicle to introduce forgotten questions, reflections, and concerns of the therapist. As Avigail stated: “Sometimes I forget things in a session and it strikes me later.” Although slightly different, these various intentions coalesce to accentuate the client’s story, encourage them further, and at times, as Avigail described, gives clients the “impetus to move beyond a stuck position.”

The second significant intention noted by counsellors was the use of the letter as a means of bringing awareness to the client of the experiences and understandings of the therapist. A number of counsellors wrote how they used the letter in this way to communicate and share their thoughts and feelings. For example, Naomi wrote of incorporating her observations and of sharing her “tentative thoughts” with the client through the letter. In a similar way, Kimberly wrote how the letter lets “clients know what I have noticed.” Chloe also valued and used the letters as a way to make known her “thinkings” and “wanderings” that occurred both during and after a session. The intention of a letter permitting a view into the therapist’s thoughts allows an element of transparency to emerge between client and counsellor. Furthermore, letters are naturally personal in tone which seems to make it permissible to share, inquire, and wonder out loud (so to speak) with a client.

Components of a Therapeutic Letter

The third major area explored in the questionnaire involved the counsellors' description of the elements they felt were important when composing a therapeutic letter. In analyzing their responses, two central features were identified: questions and reflective statements. As described by some of the counsellors, underpinning the use of these is the anchoring of them in the content of the session and in the words of the client.

A number of counsellors described the value of questions in therapeutic letters. For example, Thomas felt that questions are the most important part of a therapeutic letter. He wrote how questions in a letter "can be more quietly contemplated between sessions." Furthermore, the importance to him related specifically to the framing of these questions so that the client themselves can "mine" their own resources and knowledge and "'expose' their own strengths to themselves."

In partnership with questions, is the use of reflecting statements. Counsellors described these statements as being "strengths focused" and presenting the work that has been done and what the client or family states has yet to be done. Kimberly wrote how she often reflects what she has heard in a session in the letter with frequent quotes directly from her clients. Similar to Kimberly, Chole wrote how it is "important to use examples from the experiences they've related to you." Although the reflections vary in content, counsellors emphasized that it is important to use tentative language in the letter and draw these statements from the client's story and words.

Additional considerations viewed as important by counsellors in relation to writing a therapeutic letter included commencing the letter with "salutations" along with a sentence

or two of why the idea of writing seemed useful. Chloe noted that when working with families, it is “important to mention everyones name and some effort/achievement on their part.” Further consideration also needs to be given to the safety of delivering the letter. For example, Avigail wrote: “I always make certain how a client receives mail to ensure a letter will not be intercepted.”

Avigail also expressed the need to reflect on the letter prior to sending it. She wrote: “It is crucial that I think through the impact my observations may have (in so far as possible).” She seemed to be sharing the concern that therapeutic letters should not be written in haste but with sincere consideration to the words and the possible implications of them. Avigail also went on to note the value of inviting a response from the client regarding the letter. She wrote: “I always invite a reply or assure a client that I will be interested in hearing their thoughts in the next counselling session.” The underlying message that seems to be sent is that although the letter is composed by the counsellor, it is completely about the client’s life. As such, clients are encouraged to revise and edit what has been written.

Client Information

There were a total of seven participants who consented to be involved in this study. Each of the participants initially wrote the researcher one letter. Three of the seven participants invited further dialogue with the researcher and as a result, a letter was sent to each of these participants. Two of the three were not able to respond as they first indicated which resulted in one additional letter and a total of eight letters being analyzed in this study. The letters varied in length (one to three pages) with two of the eight being

handwritten while the remainders were in typed (word processor) form. This study was constructed to include the experiences of children, adolescents and adults who had received a therapeutic letter during counselling. Despite the interest in acquiring feedback from these different client groups, all seven participants in this study were adults. Six of the participants were female with one male. Three of the participants received their letter(s) following a reflecting team session while the remainder received them from an individual counsellor. Participants were from across Canada.

The letters that were received by the researcher were analyzed and four themes emerged:

1. Curiosity and Connection;
2. Consolidation: Relationships and Session Content;
3. Facilitating and Hindering; and
4. In Perpetuity: The Tangible and Lasting Presence of Letters

The following discussion will be devoted to these four themes along with a final section that includes additional material on participants' comments as to the structure of a therapeutic letter. These themes and the final section, represent the researcher's attempt to organize the data and present it in a clear manner and in such a way to allow as much of the participants' written words to emerge. All participant names have been changed as well as certain identifying information. Comments made by the researcher have been placed in solid brackets in order to differentiate them from the words of the participants.

Themes

Curiosity and Connection

Studying the phenomenon of therapeutic letters through the medium of letters allowed a unique closeness to emerge in relation to the use of writing as a means of communicating and of self-expression. Part of the process in receiving and reading a letter is a curiosity as to the author and what news they wish to communicate. If the written words in a letter are received unexpectedly, our interest is naturally piqued as our senses begin to engage as we open the envelope. We begin to wonder about the words and as we scan the letter for its author, a picture often emerges of the composer of the document we hold in our hand. This curiosity and inquisitiveness was articulated by some of the participants in their letters to the researcher.

Susan, the author of Letter C, expressed this curiosity as she described her initial reaction in receiving the letter. She wrote: “The very first time I had received a letter from my counsellor I wondered why would she be writing me in between sessions?” Susan questioned and contemplated the letter’s meaning even before it was opened and the words had a chance to meet her eyes.

Similarly, Clare, author of Letter F, shared her experience of receiving a letter following a counselling session with her mom. She wrote: “I had forgotten all about the visit & then a letter came in the mail from the [Phoenix Program] & I didn’t know what it could be about?” Analogous to Susan’s experience, Clare had an inquisitive stance toward the letter that in a way, beckoned her to open and explore the letter and its contents further.

Eleanor, author of Letter E, wrote that it was “quite a pleasant surprise” to receive her first letter in the mail. The curiosity towards the letters sent to Susan, Clare, and Eleanor, seemed to capture their attention and interest. Furthermore, it seemed to represent an invitation not only to open and read the letter but into a relationship with the words. The initial uncertainty and curiosity also seemed to facilitate a connection with the author. As we read a letter, we often imagine the author and perhaps, the intonation of their voice and their facial expressions. The letter and the words written, seem to demonstrate a connection and presence of the author despite not being present beyond the letter itself. The letter, in a way, “stands in” for the author’s absence.

Susan continued her letter to the researcher by writing: “After I had read the letter, I was pleased that she was interested in my progress & that I was not just another face.” Furthermore, she adds: “The letters gave me confidence and I wanted to work with my counsellor instead of against her.” Clare also expressed similar sentiments in her letter as she stated:

But knowing that they actually thought about my mom & I after we had left meant a lot to me. The fact that they had taken the time to put words on paper directly about what we had spoke about was amazing to me.

Clare wrote further about the letters indicating, “It did make me feel like they really listened and actually cared about what I/we had said at the visit.” As well, she wrote of appreciating “the gesture of them putting the effort into writing us a letter just to keep in touch.”

In the same way, Katherine, author of Letter B, was able to establish and maintain a connection through the letter despite the passing of time between sessions. She wrote: “The letters helped me feel connected to the team weeks after the session.” For Katherine, this connection brought feelings of “support” and a demonstration of the “commitment” by the reflecting team working with her. Perhaps underlying the curiosity and connection described by Susan, Clare, Eleanor, and Katherine, is an element of playfulness. Letters, although certainly communicating at times difficult and painful news, have lightness to them. They are frequently written in a spirit and context of friendship and therefore seem to limit the feeling of being alone or unnoticed in the world.

Consolidation: Relationships and Session Content

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary (Barber, 2001) defines consolidate as making or becoming strong or solid; to reinforce or strengthen. The researcher struggled to capture what was being described in the participants’ letters in relation to the “reinforcement” value of a therapeutic letter. The term “consolidate” seemed to best represent this occurrence. Participants not only wrote how their relationship was consolidated or solidified through the letter but also the discussion and content of the therapy session.

Elizabeth, author of letter A, described the usefulness of the therapeutic letter in keeping her and her family focused between sessions and thinking about the issues that had been addressed. She wrote: “Overall, the letters reinforced the work that needed to be done in the house and in some ways was a mini-session with [Diane, therapist] that held us over until we seen her again. We looked forward to her letter.” Elizabeth and her family saw

value in the letters as a means to review and integrate the session. She described reading the letters at the supper table “as it outlined the good work we were doing.”

David, author of Letter G, noted how the letter helped him contemplate further on the session he recently had with his counsellor. He wrote: “It gave me a lot of time to reflect on that session and most importantly it keep me focused on what I had said during that session.” Celine, author of Letter D, also valued the letter she received as a way to reflect on past sessions and as a means to conceptualize and solidify the changes that had occurred. She wrote that the letter, “really helped me to affirm and understand the changes I had made.” Furthermore, she reported:

I could put the document where I could read it often or as much as I needed to.

It’s a wonderful document with a lot of very powerful messages because it does show the personal growth and positive side of my life along with words I no longer use like “depression”, “controlling”, etc.

Elizabeth, David, and Celine all wrote about the value the letters had for them in allowing reflection and further consideration on the session dialogue as well as the changes that occurred during the therapy process. A unique feature of a letter that seems to encourage the contemplation and solidification that was described is its ability to be quietly read at a pace, time and location set by the reader. There is also “space” for the letter to be read in relation to the physical distance from the counselling room and the time that has elapsed from the session to holding the letter in hand. In addition to Elizabeth, David, and Celine, some participants also wrote about how the letters not only reinforced what was discussed in the session but also the bond or relationship with their counsellor.

Eleanor expressed this feeling as she wrote about her experience of receiving a letter following a reflecting team session. She stated: "They really listened to us and gave us the feedback in the room, but to see this written in a letter really reinforced how much they cared about us." Eleanor seemed to be expressing that the comments in the letter were similar from what she heard in the session but seeing it in writing brought a new understanding to how she viewed the team and her relationship with them. She continued her letter by stating: "The names of all the panel were at the bottom of the letter with each of their signatures, which made it very personal to us." The letter Eleanor received seemed to enhance the existing relationship between her and the team by demonstrating, in a concrete way, the care and concern they had for her.

Katherine also wrote about the value of the letter in relation to how it strengthened her connection with the reflecting team she worked with. She wrote: "The letters that followed the sessions showed me great concern from the team. It was tangible evidence of their dedication and concern." Katherine described how the feelings that emerged during the sessions were "reinforced greatly by the letters." She wrote, "It was the combination, - I think - that was powerful for me. The letters helped me feel connected to the team weeks after the session." Katherine also wrote that the letters:

Played a big part in maintaining the bond with the team. The bond was there from the sessions but solidified by the letters. I always took notice of who had signed the letter – how many names were there, especially who had been able to hand sign it. To me it was proof of how many viewpoints were supporting the framework of the letter and the thoughts given in it. The letters definitely held more meaning

to me because the connection was already there.

Katherine's words reflect how the letter, for her, brought focus to the relationship with the team and strengthened the link between them. Similar to Eleanor, the fact that there were personal signatures on the letter enhanced, in a very simple yet significant way, a valued relationship. Katherine also introduced how the letters held "more meaning" due to an existing positive relationship with the team. The role of the letter was enhanced for Katherine due to this relationship and perhaps some of the "meaning" and impact for her would have been lessened without it. Regardless, the relationship she did have with the team was deepened by the letter.

Facilitating and Hindering

The title of this theme reflects the contrasting experiences shared by a number of the participants. Each of them described the letter as being a helpful and constructive component of their counselling experience. In addition to what they gained from the letter, some participants also wrote how the letter they received complicated and/or added confusion to the counselling issues being addressed. The following discussion will first explore the facilitative features (i.e., validation, encouragement, and remembering) participants wrote about followed by the unhelpful aspects they identified.

In Elizabeth's letter to the researcher, she wrote how she felt "validated" and "acknowledged" by the letter she received from her counsellor. It brought her encouragement to continue and "was a good self-esteem booster." Katherine also wrote of how the letters brought encouragement and promoted a new understanding of her family's

situation. She described that the letter “validated for me that we – as a family – were on track despite our problems.” She continued: “The letters were so encouraging at a time when I badly needed encouragement. I needed to know that I was doing all that I could for my family especially for my daughter.” Katherine concluded by stating: “The session and the letter opened my eyes to a new way of seeing things with my relationship with my daughter.”

Similar sentiments were noted by Susan. She wrote in her letter of the movement towards a greater sense of “confidence” as a result of the letters she received. Susan stated that the letters “helped me to process my thoughts & to act differently on them. All the letters I have received helped me to deal with my emotions and gave me such confidence in myself. Sometimes a letter stirred me in a better direction.”

Participants in this study also described how the letters they received were used as a cue or facilitated their ability to recollect or reminisce about the session and their goals. This remembrance seemed to encourage or enhance the reflecting and reinforcing elements described in the previous theme. For example, Clare noted she “had forgotten all about the visit and then a letter came in the mail.” The letter allowed Clare to call to mind her recent session along with the issues, emotions and thoughts that were present then.

Katherine and Elizabeth also noted the value of the letter as a means of remembrance. Katherine wrote: “Many times during the sessions I wished I could take notes to remember the points made by the team – the letters showed me I did not have to ask they summarized the full session.” She noted that it was “comforting at the session to know that I did not have to try and remember their points or write them down because I knew I would later

receive them in the letter.” Katherine also described how the letters “would usually arrive a few weeks after the session so this would remind me of the topics we had discussed and of the questions they [the reflecting team] had wondered about in the feedback.”

Similarly, Elizabeth also wrote how the letters were “a great reminder to keep up the work” as well as a “reminder for all of us to be responsible to do our part.” Elizabeth also brought to the fore how the letters value as an agent of memory can be contrasted equally with its potential for harm. That is, the ability and influence of a letter to invoke feelings and thoughts in a positive direction can easily accomplish the same in a negative way. The letters themselves became double sided and “were helpful but not” as Elizabeth wrote.

Elizabeth described that “the not so good part [of the letters] was how my husband would view the letter and bring it up later that night as being a waste of time to go.” Elizabeth continued, “because of the marital problems at that time the letters would end up hindering because it was a reminder for all of us to do our part and he knew that he wasn’t holding up his part of the deal.” The environment described by Elizabeth seemed intense and the letters appeared to add to this. As noted previously, Elizabeth initially read the letters at meal times however, eventually, “they were not read at the supper table anymore.”

Returning to Katherine, she too described the value of the letters to her but also wrote how the letters captured very meaningful yet painful moments. She wrote:

After the initial readings almost two years ago I did not re-read them. Perhaps if the illness had persisted I would have, but things improved in the months following the letters and – to be honest – they reopen for me now memories of some very

difficult times.

The written words in a therapeutic letter seem to gather in and hold a description of what is occurring but unlike spoken words, those that are written down have a lasting weight to them. Despite appreciating the letter, Katherine can not escape recalling the deep emotions and pain that are represented in the letter.

David had parallel experiences as Katherine and Elizabeth in receiving and reading the letter. As described earlier, the letter allowed him “a lot of time to reflect” on the sessions he had. He went on to write: “It did arouse emotions from anger to confusion while I reread the letter several times. I received the letter from my counsellor [in August] and as I reread it today it still causes mixed emotions.” Although David concluded that letters following counselling sessions “could be a useful tool”, his reaction notes again how letters have the potential to not only be facilitative but potentially and equally a hindrance as well.

The participants’ descriptions of the letters being a hindrance or perhaps double-sided, is an aspect that may not necessarily be obvious to authors. Hindrance, in the participants’ letters to the researcher, played out in subtle yet noticeable ways. It intensified a complex marital situation and brought to the fore pain, hurt, and anger. In this regard, the letters became obstacles or perhaps played interference with the issues at hand.

In Perpetuity: The Tangible and Lasting Presence of Letters

A unique element of therapeutic letters is their concreteness and how the reader can hold, for a period determined by them, the questions and reflections posed by their

counsellor. Out of the seven participants in this study, five made direct reference to still having the letter(s) sent to them by their counsellor.

For example, Celine described keeping the letter she received and re-reading it as a way to mark her personal growth. She wrote: "I could put the document where I could read it often or as much as I needed to." Celine concluded her letter to the researcher by stating: "I continue to read [the letter] though certainly not as often." Katherine also kept the letters she received but as noted previously, she did not feel it necessary to re-read them. She did describe, however, the enjoyment and value of having the written words. She wrote: "It was very good for me to see them 'in print.' I had appreciated the sessions but the follow up letters gave me concrete evidence of how our family was doing and in such gentle tones."

Similarly, Eleanor kept the letters she received and wrote: "From time to time I would read the letter again to reflect on the session." Eleanor also made reference to the value of receiving the letter in the mail. Her letter described that "receiving a letter through 'snail mail' versus e-mail makes it seem all the more personal and caring."

Celine, Katherine, and Eleanor all kept the letter(s) they received but had varying need to re-read and reflect on it. Having the words and the letter 'on-hand' seemed to allow them to control the frequency of re-visiting the letter along with the thoughts and emotions that accompanied it.

Additional Participant Comments about the Letters' Structure

The following will conclude the results section by outlining further comments in the participants' letters relating specifically to their understanding of the form of these letters.

Participants described the structure of the letters they received in different ways. Some enjoyed the letter because it "outlined" the work that was being done in therapy. Another found the letter to give "positive, reflective points that could never be taken as criticism." As well, they noted the letter to ask "a number of questions that gave me points to ponder" [and] "food for thought." Furthermore, one participant wrote:

The question style of the letters is an excellent format. There would always be a paragraph addressed to each member of our family. Some of the paragraph would refer to our conversations in the sessions and the rest would be questions. The questions, this participant wrote, "gave me choices to think about."

Additional comments about the structure were: an offering of "suggestions or thoughts"; that it "captured what we had said and reflected it back to us"; it provided "thought-provoking questions about how we felt when certain issues were discussed"; and that it was a "positive summary of the session."

The emotional tones of the letters were also described by some of the participants. For example, one participant wrote that they "found the letters to be very warm and comforting" and appreciated "the kind words said by the team in the letters." The statements and words in the letters were also noted to be written in "gentle tones."

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the results of the analysis of the participants letters sent to the researcher. The discussion centered around four main themes that were developed along with additional statements by participants on the structure of the letters. In summary, the therapeutic letters received by the participants can be viewed as playing an active role in their therapy. That is, participants were influenced (in small ways, significant ways, in ways that were helpful, and ways that were unhelpful) by the letter they received from their counsellor.

Within the therapeutic process, the letters held meaning as a way to connect, deepen, facilitate as well as complicate. In collectively considering the participants words, the letters they received were not neutral adjuncts but rather acted as a catalyst that brought movement, in thought and action, to the client.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

However – and mark my words, young man – I believe we may be actually closer and more truly communicating in letters than when talking. The vertical connection downward and inwards, each on his solitary own, may be making a connection of souls through imagination, a connection that does not necessarily happen in live conversation or on the telephone – James Hillman to Michael Ventura

This study has examined the use of therapeutic letters from the perspective of clients. A total of eight letters were written to the researcher by seven participants reflecting on their experiences of receiving such a document. The results were presented in Chapter 4 and were focused around four themes. In this Chapter, each theme will be revisited and explored within the larger context of the literature. Following this, will be a discussion on considerations for counsellors and future research. In closing this Chapter, a final section will be devoted to a personal reflection on letters and the process of this study by the researcher.

Themes

Curiosity and Connection

The participants in this study described how the letter they received from their counsellor was not only a “surprise” invoking curiosity, it also established a connection to them during the time between sessions. After opening and reading the letter, one participant described how happy she was that her counsellor was “interested” in her and that she was “not just another face.” The letter, in making that connection, seemed to

communicate to her a sense of presence. This, in general, was true of many of the participants.

In Yalom's most recent book, *The Gift of Therapy* (2002), he writes how frequently clients ponder but rarely ask: "Do you ever think about me between sessions or do I just drop out of your life for the rest of the week?"(p.28). He describes how clients do enter his thoughts during the time between sessions and he encouraged clinicians "to let your patients matter to you, . . . let them enter your mind, influence you, change you – and not to conceal this from them"(p.26-27). Letters involve reflection, contemplation, and a certain element of transparency on the part of the counsellor. In this way, letters can be considered a gesture demonstrating how a client has entered the counsellor's thoughts and how they have been moved by the story told during the therapy hour.

The letter's value in making a connection between counselling sessions is an important one. In therapy, a common element is the transferring of knowledge and practice to a client's "real" world outside of the therapy room. As Nylund and Thomas (1994) describe, letters send "the message that being in the world is more important than being in the therapy office"(p.39). When the connection is made through the letter and the therapeutic conversation is extended, Nylund and Thomas (1994) note that "clients are more likely to rely on their own knowledge and less on the expert knowledge of the therapist" (p.39).

Consolidation: Relationships and Session Content

A number of the participants in this study wrote how the letters they received from their counsellor provided an opportunity to solidify the content of a therapy session. Participants used words like “reinforced”, “focused”, and “affirm and understand” in describing the letters they received. The value of viewing the letter as a “mini-session”, as one participant described, permits a re-reading and re-evaluating of what had occurred in the session and to reinforcing the desire to live it out.

Wood and Uhl (1988), in describing their use of post-session letters, noted how a letter “creates another opportunity to join the therapist and family and offer clarity, organization, intensity and focusing” (p.50). They also state how the repetition and emphasis creates greater accountability not only with the client but the therapist as well. The client’s story, their goals, desires, and wishes are reinforced and brought to the fore with each letter. Not only do letters seem to hold value in solidifying session content, many participants wrote how the letters held meaning and concretely demonstrated the care and concern their counsellors had for them.

Participants in this study clearly related to and enjoyed the personal nature of the letters and how it “reinforced” the relationship between them and their counsellor(s). The creation of a strong therapeutic alliance or relationship has been gaining recognition in clinical practice and support in the literature. It has become a significant factor in achieving successful outcomes regardless of the therapist’s selected model (Ackerman, et.al., 2001; Horvath, 2001; Summers & Barber, 2003). Based on an analysis of psychotherapy research, Miller, Duncan, and Hubble (1997) describe four curative factors that are involved in counselling: extratherapeutic factors; the therapy relationship;

therapeutic technique; and expectancy, hope and placebo. Of these four factors, the relationship between client and counsellor is the most significant factor under the therapists control that contributes to positive outcome. In light of this research, the fact that participants wrote about the value of the letter as not only a way to make a connection with their counsellor outside of the therapy room but as a vehicle to deepen their relationship, is an important finding.

The letters ability to add depth to a relationship seemed related to the very personal nature of the document. The time taken to write it, the meaning of the written words, and the personal signatures all contributed to the letter's appeal and to the enhancement of the relationship. What has also come across in the participants' letters is that there seemed to be an established bond with their counsellor or team prior to receiving the letter. As Katherine wrote, the letter "held more meaning to me because the connection was already there."

It can be postulated that the impact and significance of a letter is greater when accompanied by an existing supportive relationship. Although counsellors in this study noted using therapeutic letters as a means of engagement and joining when some uncertainty was present, participants in this study seemed to gain more from the letter when a comfort level was established. Moules (2000, 2003) noted similar sentiments from the participants in her study. She concluded that letters which have the potential to be granted noteworthy therapeutic value and status, are ones that will and have been "read out of, and into, a relationship of significance" (2003, p.44).

Facilitating and Hindering

The contrasting value and role of a therapeutic letter was articulated by some of the participants. On the one hand, they described the letter bringing encouragement and promoting a sense of self-reliance. It also seemed to facilitate a re-appraisal of a situation or relationship. Furthermore, as a memory aide, it seemed to serve a couple of purposes. For participants who had previously received a letter, it brought some comfort to them to know that while they were in a session, they did not have to remember the points made as the letter would capture and summarize this for them. Secondly, the letter acted as a cue or trigger for participants in recalling what had taken place in the session. This remembrance occurred outside of the therapy room and brought participants back to what they were talking and thinking about with their counsellor. The process of reflecting and consolidating previously described was initiated by the letters ability to encourage participants to reminisce. Although certainly beneficial, the letter's value in calling to mind feelings, thoughts, etc., also acted as a hindrance as some participants described.

Disadvantages and ethical considerations in writing letters have been described by different counsellors in the literature (Batha, 2003; Moules, 2003; Shilts & Ray, 1989; White, 1995; White & Murray, 2002; Wood & Uhl, 1988). Generally, these have related to the time involved in composing a letter and to confidentiality issues. Participants' letters brought to the fore how letters can be very intense documents which can, through no intent on behalf of the counsellor, arouse and invoke emotions in an unhelpful way and perhaps aggravate a client's situation.

One of the participants who described some of these sentiments was David. He wrote in his letter about feeling confused and angry by the letter he received. For David, the value of being able to read and contemplate the letter away from the session may have left too much room for misreading of the letter's intent. In this regard, the letter he received seemed to, in part, not only hinder his relationship but perhaps the progress he felt he was making.

Susan also wrote how the letter she received was almost used as a weapon or tool that heightened a tense situation. It seemed to have been used as a symbolic wedge drawing a distinction between the directions two marital partners wanted to go. For Susan, the letter did not appear to hinder or compromise the relationship with her counsellor. It did seem to interfere and complicate the marital dynamics that were occurring.

Participants' descriptions of some of the unhelpful effects of a letter encourages authors (counsellors) to not only follow-up the letter with gentle inquiry but to be mindful of how the letter is constructed and how it may be received. Bond (2000; as cited by West, 2002) introduced the concept of "ethical mindfulness" which involves the counsellor taking personal ownership of acting ethically beyond a reliance on an established ethical code. The relatively simple act of putting pen to paper becomes complex when thorough consideration is needed. Participants' words seem to encourage counsellors to put forethought, as much as possible, into the letter.

In Perpetuity: The Tangible and Lasting Presence of Letters

Emily Dickinson wrote, “a letter always seemed to me like immortality” (as cited by Decker, 1998, p. 141). Her statement held more meaning than she perhaps realized as her letters continue to be studied by academics and enjoyed by many in leisure. Her comment clearly implies though, that letters are lasting documents. They withstand time recording moments in a life and once sent by the author, are left to its reader’s discretion and interpretation. Intertwined with the “immortality” of a letter is its humble and quiet appearance. Despite this presentation, the words contained in a letter can hold a range of meanings with varied intensity as has been described by the participants in this study.

A majority of the participants wrote of still having the letters that were sent to them. Unlike a phone call or the words in a session, the messages and themes conveyed in a letter were, in a concrete way, echoed for them. In conceptualizing a letter in this respect, there is a potential for a “longer-lasting” (Wojcik & Iverson, 1989, p. 81) therapeutic effect than what could be accomplished by a session. The re-reading of a letter, as some participants noted doing in this study, allows a continuous examining and reflecting process to occur that is ultimately controlled by them.

Another important feature of a letter described by participants was being able to see and hold the musings, the questions, the messages, and their own words “in print”. It offered tangible proof of what they had experienced in a session. As well, when words are captured on paper, they seem to firm-up or make what has been verbally discussed, more real. There is a belief that when something is in writing, it must contain truth and we therefore grant it a heightened status.

Implications for Counselling Practice

Letter writing has been taken up by many counsellors of various traditions over the years. The influence of post-modernism in the counselling field has brought new approaches into play with narrative therapy being one of them. The recent resurgence of counsellor-authored letter writing can be attributed to this system of counselling and its emphasis on language and story. The counsellors in this study were predominantly influenced by narrative and solution-oriented ideas however letter writing is certainly not restricted to clinicians practicing in this domain.

This study allowed the opportunity for participants to write about the meaning and value of having been a recipient of one or more therapeutic letters. Their responses were compiled, organized, and presented in the previous chapter. In collectively reviewing the themes that emerged from the letters written by the participants, five practice-based considerations for engaging in letter writing were developed. They are the following:

1. Each participant in this study articulated that the letter was personally meaningful and helpful to them. Some participants also noted how the letter intensified an already difficult situation or invoked painful or confused emotions. This dual effect of a letter emphasizes the need for counsellors to recognize how significant a letter can be in terms of being therapeutically helpful and/or harmful to a client or family. Thorough consideration needs to be given to the intention of the letter, its composition and to its safe arrival at the client's door. Being "ethically mindful" while making the decision to write a letter and while writing may be helpful in foreseeing, as much as possible, potential difficulties and reactions.

2. As this study seemed to demonstrate, an existing supportive relationship between client and counsellor gave the letter greater meaning and value. Counsellors in this study described using the letter, in part, to join with a client when there was uncertainty in the relationship. It seems however, the letter holds more potential as an adjunctive intervention when it is accompanied by a therapeutic relationship that is, at least, partially developed.
3. In this study, participants made reference to the personal nature of the letters they received. Two participants, who had received a letter(s) from a reflecting team, wrote specifically about how they noticed and appreciated the signatures at the end of the letter. The signatures seemed to reinforce the personal and intimate tone of the letter and suggests that letters be written in a spirit that reflects the humor, the joy, the compassion, etc. of the relationship and the character of the counsellor.
4. Participants' description of the structure of the letters also gives some suggestions about their composition. Generally, there was an appreciation of the questions and "reflective points" in the therapeutic letters. This provided clients a means to review and reflect, to try on a new understanding of their situation, and to think about potential choices and options. As such, the creation and inclusion of questions in therapeutic letters can and should be seen as a vital and important aspect. Another feature of the letter's structure that was described in relation to a family, was the individual messages and questions given to each member. There was an appreciation to this detail as it seemed to both make a personal and collective connection to family members and the family as a whole.

5. Participants' letters to the researcher seem to demonstrate the value of counsellors following up, in some way, the letter they sent. Each participant was moved in some respect by the letter they received. Their written words to this researcher describe the letter as a curious and valuable document with little reference to it being a neutral or insignificant part of their counselling experience. Inquiring about the letter can serve two purposes. First, counsellors are able to provide opportunity to clarify and explore with the client any misreading or interpretation of the intent, content or spirit of the letter. As some participants wrote, the letter influenced a range of emotional reactions in them with one participant noting the letter as a "hindrance" due to her family and marital situation. In these circumstances, allowing the letter to be discussed could correct misperceptions or allow the counsellor to re-assess or re-focus on the client and their circumstances. Secondly, providing follow-up allows the client to be further engaged in the letter and the therapy process by giving them opportunity to edit or revise what has been written. In the narrative tradition, clients are viewed as the ultimate editor of the letter as it is their story that is being documented. Follow-up can be completed in different ways including a verbal discussion at the next meeting or an expressed invitation to a client to write about their response regarding the content and the themes of the letter.

Written Words and the Electronic Medium

This study focused on writing and the use of letters that were received by mail. Recently, another form of writing and receiving communication has emerged in

counselling and warrants exploration as to its impact on therapeutic letter writing. This relatively new mode of correspondence is that of computer-mediated communication.

The last decade has seen a greater role and usage of the internet and email in counselling (McDaniel, 2003; Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004; Wright, 2002). The terms “e-therapy” or “web-counselling” have entered our vocabulary and have become a part of many counsellors daily practices. These terms have been variously defined however the US National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) has put forward the following definition: “WebCounseling is the practice of professional counseling and information delivery that occurs when client(s) and counselor are in separate or remote locations and utilize electronic means to communicate over the Internet” (as cited by Manhal-Baugus, 2001, p.551).

In the 1900’s when telecommunications began to revolutionize the way we communicate, the traditional personal letter was quickly ushered aside. With the increasing use of email, does the brief resurgence of therapeutic letter writing hold the same fate as letters did at the beginning of the 20th Century? Can a letter be sent via email instead of hand delivery? Are any therapeutic effects lost this way? In comparing the two, we can recognize similarities such as the continued use of the written word and as McDaniel (2003) recently wrote, the need for a “strong-enough therapeutic alliance” (p.12). However, electronic communication may not necessarily convey the personal nature of a letter that is composed and mailed to a client.

A few differences can be noted between this relatively new phenomenon and that of mailed or traditional correspondence. In writing an email, we often do so at a faster pace

with perhaps less time for contemplation or reflection. Electronic communication also eliminates the “space” between a session and the written communication that follows. The letter’s natural delay allows time for client reflection and perhaps enhances a sense of curiosity if one is anticipating the letter. There is also the issue of materiality or the tangible nature of a letter. Many participants in this study kept and re-read the letter at different times. Although an email could also be read at various times or even printed out, the feel and perhaps the ‘personalness’ may not quite match that of a mailed letter. The researcher’s bias in favor of mailed communication is obvious, however this researcher also recognizes that further study into the uses and efficacy of email may invite new possibilities in counselling and enhance our services to clients.

At the same time, a few lingering thoughts are left in concluding this section on electronic communication. One is from the editors of a book on letters. Kermode and Kermode (1995) describe in the introduction of their book *The Oxford Book of Letters*, how letters are themselves a collection of personal and world history. Letters have been saved, studied, and read for pleasure. However, in describing the instantaneous way to communicate today, Kermode and Kermode (1995) note how it is “hard to imagine an anthology of faxes, and harder still to foresee an Oxford Book of E-mail” (p.xxiii).

As well, a participant in this study, contemplating having received the letter via email instead through traditional mail, wrote: “Receiving a letter through ‘snail mail’ versus email makes it seem all the more personal and caring.” The idea expressed of the uniqueness and sincerity of a letter by this participant is also nicely articulated by author Margaret Shepard (2002). Shepard wrote: “A handwritten note is like dining by

candlelight instead of flicking on the lights, like making a gift instead of ordering a product, like taking a walk instead of driving” (p.xv). The letter, despite some of its disadvantages, can’t escape being an intimate way to communicate and bind oneself further into a relationship.

Suggestions for Future Research

The conclusion of this study has brought this researcher back to the research question with not only more information and answers, but with a wealth of new and fascinating questions. This study was not only the third formal project examining therapeutic letters but the first to incorporate the written word as the central component of its design. Using this medium throughout the study allowed participants words and the letters they wrote to be the principal focus. Limitations of this study were outlined in Chapter 3, however a brief review may strengthen the construction of studies that will follow.

An important realization that emerged during the data collection and analysis was how much letters are about a dialogue between people or two groups of people. There seems to be a reciprocal expectation attached to letters with each communication adding depth to the relationship and comfort level. Due to the design and the concern of confidentiality, the researcher was not able to write back to all participants. In many ways, this seemed to leave a conversation half completed with the researcher yearning for further dialogue in the form of another letter. This limitation was a frustration as there were many experiences and questions that arose while reading the participants’ letters

that beckoned a fuller understanding. In reflecting on this experience, it would have been beneficial to extend the letter 'conversation'. This would have enabled a greater connection to be established between participant and researcher and perhaps the ability to move deeper into the meaning of the letters they received.

An interesting option in relation to studying the phenomenon of therapeutic letters would be to combine both live interviews with participant reflections in the form of letters. A relationship could be established between researcher and participant through the interview process. This could be followed by a letter from the researcher with an invitation to participants to write back. This would not only capture the contemplative nature of writing but allow the researcher to immerse themselves at a greater depth in the whole process of writing and receiving letters.

In addition to this possibility, the research potential of therapeutic letters and of counsellor-authored writing in general, is rich and has yet to be fully explored and mapped. For example, many counsellors send letters to children and adolescents yet this group's understanding and use of such documents has yet to be the attention of any formal study. The incorporation of letters into the practice of reflecting teams also deserves research. The burgeoning use of the internet and email by counsellors would make fascinating study in relation to comparing the differences between emails and mailed letters as adjuncts to therapy. Would there be a difference and/or a preference for counsellors/clients? Are there certain client groups that would best respond to a therapeutic letter sent via email or traditional mail? Are there gender differences in relation to how one receives and responds to a letter? How can therapeutic letters be

applied to group counselling? These questions could be examined through a complimentary repertoire of quantitative and qualitative approaches. However, the emergence of qualitative co-research seems to open up numerous possibilities for further exploration of these relatively uncharted areas.

Concluding Thoughts

This has been a very enjoyable study to undertake. Although challenging, it was an honor and both personally and professionally engaging to be involved with the participants and their counsellors. The interest and support this research received from both of these groups was of tremendous value. Their words and encouragement helped guide and bring this project to its conclusion and has enriched the understanding and knowledge base of this intervention.

I have used the third person tense throughout the writing of this thesis. However, in commencing this final section, I felt it more appropriate to write from a first person perspective.

Qualitative research engages researchers in such a way that they can not just be bystanders to what unfolds in front of them. Actively being involved is part of the process. Conducting a study on letters through the use of letters brought me into an intimate experience of writing, awaiting, receiving, and reading letters.

I met the letters that arrived at my door with excitement and inquisitiveness (and not to mention a great sense of relief that I had some interested participants!). In history, letters that were sent often had a tenuous and uncertain journey to their intended readers.

Many of these letters did not complete their journey or were delayed en route. During the completion of this study, I was faced with a similar concern when Canada Post announced a possible strike by its employees. Although this did not occur, it demonstrated the fragile nature of a letter and how susceptible to harm it can be. It also reinforced how letters carry more than just the news the author wishes to share. They are, in essence, an outward sign of the author's safety and presence and the readers importance to them. As Jonathan Sewell wrote to his wife Harriet in 1798:

At this distance writing is my only mode of communication, the only mode in which I can enjoy your Society, which Heaven, you, and the world can witness, I value beyond anything which the Eye can See, which the Tongue can describe or which the heart of man can conceive (as cited by Harrison, 1997, p.1).

Should, for example, the eloquent words of Mr. Sewell not arrive to his wife, wonder and concern would be cast not only on the letter's fate, but of his as well.

Once the letters arrived, I often quickly opened and read through them. The letters frequently stirred my senses as visual images began to emerge of the participant writing the letter and of the experiences they were describing. This attempt to recall or conjure up visual images, voice volume, and emotion occurred despite there being no previous face-to-face contact with them. What also emerged was a sense of wonder and interest in their written words. The participants' words often brought a smile to my face and questions and musings arose while I read their letters. These included: "Why the choice of this word?"; "The tone seems to have shifted"; and "Why has this emotion been aroused?"

As I have noted previously, I was often left wanting more dialogue with the participant. Their letter seemed to commence a conversation that I felt called to respond in kind. This also reinforced the relational nature of letters. I felt a connection had been made and that the relationship and discourse could be moved further with the additional sharing of words between us.

My involvement in this study has furthered my interest in letter writing and it has refined my thinking and practice of using this intervention. I am excited to begin practicing again with this knowledge and engage in letter writing. This excitement however, is tempered with caution and a new sense of mindfulness as to the intent of sending a letter and the repercussions (positive and negative) that may transpire.

Another interesting feature I observed during this study is how catching or contagious letter writing is. For example, one of the counsellors in this study (whose client shared with them they were participating) described how after her client wrote a letter to me, proceeded to write a letter back to her counsellor. This counsellor was surprised but naturally intrigued that her client took the time to write her. More personally and while in the process of conducting this research, I flew to northern Labrador for an unrelated project. During my stay, I took much pleasure in writing a lengthy letter to my wife and brother-in-law. It was such a nice opportunity to write and quietly reflect on them. My thoughts also turned toward the historical significance of letter writing. One can only imagine the joy, the sorrow, the love, the heartbreak, the anger, the tears, and the laughter that has been called forth by the humble presence of a letter.

In concluding this chapter and this thesis, I wish to close with a quote that seems to capture both the simplicity and complexity inherent in a letter:

There is something very sensual about a letter. The physical contact of pen to paper, the time set aside to form thoughts, the folding of the paper into the envelope, licking it closed, addressing it, a chosen stamp, and then the release of the letter to the mailbox – are all acts of tenderness . . . Once opened, a connection is made. We are not alone in the world – Tempest Williams.

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Appendix A: Example of a Therapeutic Letter

The following is an example of a therapeutic letter sent to a 12 year-old child being seen in therapy:

Dear Thomas:

I really enjoyed meeting with you yesterday. As I mentioned to you, I wanted to write you a letter about some of the things we talked about. These are just some of my thoughts and I may not have it quite right but you can let me know next time we meet.

I was quite impressed with your ability to tell me about the situation with your mom and dad and how you are feeling. I agree with you that it really is “rotten” that you have not been able to see your dad in a while. Parents separating is a really hard thing to go through. I can also understand why you wouldn’t want to go to school and how this situation has made you very angry. As we discussed, it is also messing things up with how you talk with your mom and your younger sister. I remember you telling me that this was really bothering you as you don’t like yelling at them.

I took some notes when we met about some of the things that may be helpful for you. These included: talking with your Grandpa, playing on the computer, counting to ten before yelling, talk with your dad more on the phone, and drawing pictures.

I was also thinking about your powers as an excellent Fort Builder and was wondering if your abilities to create such magnificent structures could be used to assist you in other ways? For example, with the anger and also the frustration at school. How would you design such a plan? What would you need? What role would your mom play? Your dad?, sister?, teacher?

Anyway Thomas, I look forward to talking with you more – Good Luck and I’ll see you soon!

Your Friend,
Nathan

Appendix B

COUNSELLOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions regarding your background and your current use of therapeutic letters. Please feel free to write your responses on a separate piece of paper or use the additional page attached. Thank you.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Academic and Clinical Background

1. Current place of employment:

2. Position:

3. Number of years of clinical experience:

4. Academic background (e.g., B.S.W.; M.S.W.; M.A.; etc.):

5. Professional association(s) that you have registered or chartered status with:

6. Briefly describe your theoretical orientation (e.g., primarily narrative; solution focused; cognitive; etc.):

Current use of Therapeutic Letters

7. How long have you been writing therapeutic letters?

8. What factors determine whether or not you will write a therapeutic letter to a client?

9. Please describe your intentions in sending a therapeutic letter to a client.

10. When you decide to send a therapeutic letter to a client, how many on average do you send to them during the course of therapy?

11. What elements do you feel are important to include when composing a therapeutic letter?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Appendix C: Counsellor Letter of Invitation

Nathan Pyle
M.Ed. Candidate
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, NL A1B 3X8

Dear Counsellor:

I am a Masters student in the Counselling Psychology program of the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am presently conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. Bill Kennedy and Dr. Clar Doyle as part of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Education. I am writing to provide information regarding my research project **Letters about letters: Clients' written reflections on therapeutic letters** so as to help you decide whether you wish to participate.

This study is exploring the use of counsellor-authored letters, frequently referred to as "therapeutic letters". The goal of this study is to explore the meaning and significance of these letters in the clients' lives. This study aims to contribute to the understanding and use of this therapeutic intervention as part of the clinical work with children, adolescents, couples, and families. As the title implies, I will not be conducting live interviews but rather invite your clients to reflect, in the form of a letter, about the impact and significance of the therapeutic letter(s) that was sent to them.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire regarding your academic and clinical background (title, years experience, therapeutic orientation, etc.) as well as questions related to your use of therapeutic letters (How long have you used them? When and how often do you send them? etc.).

A second request that will be made of you is to select 2 or 3 of your current and/or past clients whom you have sent a letter(s) to. The selection of clients will be at your discretion but please use the following as a guide: consider a range of clients (children, adolescents, adults, families, and couples); if children are selected, ensure they are over the age of 8 years; exclude clients with serious mental health diagnoses (e.g., schizophrenia); and, although the presenting concerns and issues of your client(s) are not significant, those who have counselling issues that may make them vulnerable to significant emotional distress if they participate in this study, should be excluded.

Appendix D: Counsellor Consent Form

Project Title: “Letters about letters: Clients’ written reflections on therapeutic letters.”

Investigator: Nathan Pyle

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

This project is exploring the question “What meanings and significance do clients attribute to a therapeutic letter they have received from their counsellor?”. The goal is to understand how clients perceive and the value they place upon letters they have received in the context of counselling. This information will lend understanding to the use of this intervention in relation to its therapeutic significance.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

1. Complete a brief questionnaire regarding your academic and clinical background and your use of therapeutic letters;
2. Select a client(s) to whom you have sent a letter(s) to. Discuss this study with them and give them an information and consent package. It should be emphasized that whether your client(s) goes on to participate or not, this will in no way affect their relationship with you; and
3. Provide support and assistance to your clients in the unlikely event that they experience some distressing emotions during the reflection and composition of their letter.

All collected information will be considered confidential and will be kept in a secure cabinet in a locked room. The identity of all participants will remain anonymous and any identifying data will be removed. With anonymity thus preserved, study results may be shared in publications and presentations. The data collected will be destroyed two years after the publication of the final report. The results of this study will be available if you are interested.

Appendix E: Participant (Adult) Letter of Invitation

Nathan Pyle
M.Ed. Candidate
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

Dear Potential Participant:

I am a Masters student in the Counselling Psychology program of the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am presently conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. Bill Kennedy and Dr. Clar Doyle as part of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Education. I am writing to provide information regarding my research project **Letters about letters: Clients' written reflections on therapeutic letters** so as to help you decide whether you wish to participate.

This study is attempting to understand what it was like to receive a letter from your counsellor. As the title of this project implies, I will not be conducting face to face interviews. Instead, if you agree to participate in this study, I will ask for your reflections (about the letter(s) you received from your counsellor) in the form of a letter. That is, you will write a letter about the letter you received!

In your letter to me, I would like you to share what it meant to receive the letter(s) and the value and significance it had for you (and your family). I encourage you to share as much as you can about your experience of receiving this letter and how it impacted you. Do not worry about spelling or grammar and should you need more information or directions, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone or email.

All correspondence will remain confidential. Your identity will remain anonymous and any identifying information will be removed. All information collected will be kept in a secure cabinet with access only to my supervisors and myself. It is possible that your reflections and writing of the letter may raise some emotional issues. In this event, if desired, your counsellor will be available regarding support for you. There is no compensation for your participation. I have enclosed two pre-addressed stamped envelopes for you to return the consent form and your letter should you decide to participate in this study.

Appendix F: Participant (Adult) Consent Form

Project Title: “Letters about letters: Clients’ written reflections on therapeutic letters.”

Investigator: Nathan Pyle

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

This project is exploring the question “What meanings and significance do clients attribute to a therapeutic letter they have received from their counsellor?” The goal is to understand how clients perceive and the value they place upon letters they have received in the context of counselling. This information will lend understanding to the future use of this intervention.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

1. Write a letter to the researcher reflecting on the meaning and significance of the letter(s) you received from your counsellor. The time commitment required to write the letter will vary and will be at your own pace.

All collected information will be considered confidential and will be kept in a secure cabinet in a locked room. The identity of all participants will remain anonymous and any identifying information will be removed. With anonymity thus preserved, study results may be shared in publications or presentations. The data collected will be destroyed 2 years after the publication of the final report. The results of this study will be available if you are interested.

Appendix G: Parent/Guardian Letter of Invitation

Nathan Pyle
M.Ed. Candidate
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, NL A1B 3X8

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s):

I am a Masters student in the Counselling Psychology program of the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am presently conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. Bill Kennedy and Dr. Clar Doyle as part of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Education. I am writing to provide information regarding my research project **Letters about letters: Clients' written reflections on therapeutic letters** so as to help you decide whether you would like your child to participate.

This study is attempting to understand what it was like for your child to receive a letter from their counsellor. As the title of this project implies and due to the distance involved, I will not be conducting face to face interviews. Instead, if you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, I will ask them for their reflections (about the letter(s) they received from their counsellor) in the form of a letter. That is, I will invite them to write a letter about the letter they received. In their letter to me, I will ask them to share what it meant to receive the letter(s) from their counsellor and how helpful it was to them.

All correspondence will remain confidential. The identity of your child will remain anonymous and any identifying information will be removed. All information collected will be kept in a secure cabinet with access only to my supervisors and myself. It is possible that in the writing of the letter, some emotional issues may be raised. In the unlikely occurrence of this, and if desired, your child's counsellor will be available regarding support for them. There is no compensation for your child's participation. I have enclosed a pre-addressed stamped envelope for you to return the consent form and also supplied the same for your child to send their consent form and their letter should you both decide to participate in this study.

Appendix H: Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Project Title: “Letters about letters: Clients’ written reflections on therapeutic letters.”

Investigator: Nathan Pyle

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your child’s participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

This project is exploring the question “What meanings and significance do clients attribute to a therapeutic letter they have received from their counsellor?”. The goal is to understand how children and adolescents perceive and the value they place upon letters they have received in the context of counselling. This information will lend understanding to the use of this intervention in relation to its therapeutic significance.

If you agree to allow your child to participate, they will be asked to:

1. Write a letter to the researcher reflecting on the meaning and significance of the letter(s) they received from their counsellor.

All collected information will be considered confidential and will be kept in a secure cabinet in a locked room. The identity of all participants will remain anonymous and any identifying information will be removed. With anonymity thus preserved, study results may be shared in publications or presentations. The data collected will be destroyed two years after the publication of the final report. The results of this study will be available if you are interested.

Appendix I: Child/Adolescent Letter of Invitation

Nathan Pyle
M.Ed. Candidate
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, NL A1B 3X8

Dear Participant:

I am writing to you about a project I am organizing and which I would like to invite you to become involved in. Before I describe the details, I will give you some information about myself. I am a Masters student in the Counselling Psychology program of the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. This project is part of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Education. My project's title is called: **Letters about letters: Clients' written reflections on therapeutic letters.**

What this title means is that I am interested in understanding what it was like for you to receive a letter or letters from your counsellor. Due to how far apart we are, I will not be meeting with you in person but instead, if you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to write about the letter(s) you received from your counsellor in the form of a letter to me (that is, you will write a letter about the letter!).

In your letter to me, I would like you to share what it meant to receive the letter(s) from your counsellor and the value and significance it had for you. I encourage you to share as much as you can about your experience of receiving the letter(s) and how it impacted you (for example: Did it surprise you to receive it?; Was it helpful?; What did you like most about it?; Did it affect your relationship with your counsellor?; etc.) Do not worry about spelling or grammar and should you need more information or directions, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone or email.

All the information you write down will be kept confidential. This means other people will not see what you wrote except for me and my supervisors. Your real name will not be included (you may choose a fake name that I can use) and any identifying information (such as where you live) will be removed.



