

‘Changed by the Encounter’: The Learning and Change that Counsellors and Psychotherapists Experience as a Result of their Work with Clients

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.....(signature).

Consider Luke Skywalker's task
in the Star Wars trilogy
as he struggles with the conflicting urges
to kill or yield to his father...
in the climatic scene,
at the very heart of the Death Star,
in the belly of the beast,
he is finally able to cut the Gordian knot,
not by killing or yielding
but by fighting his father
and at the point of victory,
laying down his weapon
and refusing to kill him.
At once he is able to give his own love voice,
to fulfil his destiny in a quite unexpected way,
and to become a Jedi knight.
The transformation is complete.

(Daloz, 1987, p. 147).

This thesis is dedicated to my family, past, present and future.

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the learning and change that counsellors and psychotherapists experience as a consequence of their work with clients. It details two qualitative studies: a constructivist grounded theory study, and a co-operative self-search inquiry (CSSI) that is based on both the heuristic and co-operative inquiry methodologies.

As part of the grounded theory study, I compared the learning and change in two cohorts of participants: a group of therapists who had had one or more significant experiences of working with clients with HIV, and a group that had had no such experiences. Following the theoretical sampling study and literature search, it became clear that no major differences seemed to be evident between the learning and change in both groups of therapists. I therefore constructed a model of general therapist learning and change from the findings of the grounded theory study. This model details the ways in which counsellors and psychotherapists learn and change both personally and professionally as a result of their work with clients. It also refers to the change process, difficult aspects of working as a therapist and other catalysts of learning and change for therapists.

For the CSSI, I studied my own and a co-researcher's learning and change experiences, which were recorded in journals over a period of 9 months. The findings of this study complement those of the grounded theory study by providing further insight into the ways in which learning experiences occur for therapists.

I have linked my findings to some of the literature on education and learning, as well as the literature on transformative learning, and have discussed their implications for practice, training and supervision in counselling and psychotherapy. As part of my reflexive process, and congruent with the theme of learning and change, I have also provided details about the ways in which I have learnt and changed as a result of engaging in my doctoral studies.

Acknowledgements

As I began to finish writing this thesis, several of my friends either gave birth or started to think about having children. This thesis is my baby, born as a result of a long and sometimes difficult labour. Without the help of the people I acknowledge below, it might never have come into existence.

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Whilst working on this thesis, I have undertaken counselling training, which has been necessary for the co-operative self-search inquiry. I therefore also wish to acknowledge my diploma course trainers, who have been fantastic, and my fellow trainees, who have been great company, because I have learnt so much from all of you. Thank you to my therapists John and Susan, and to all my clients, whom I am privileged to have spent time with.

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Publications and presentations based on the thesis

2004

Counsellors' transformational learning experiences in HIV and AIDS counselling: The first four interviews. Paper presented at the Annual School of Education Research Conference, Exeter University, 13th May.

2005

Counsellors' transformational learning experiences in HIV and AIDS counselling. Paper presented at the Annual School of Education Research Conference, Exeter University, 15th May.

Counsellors' experiences of personal and professional change in HIV and AIDS counselling. Poster presented at the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy Annual Research Conference, Nottingham, 21st May.

Comment on David Murphy 'A qualitative study into the experience of mandatory personal therapy during training' CPR, 5, 1, March 2005. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, September 2005. Vol. 5, no. 3, p. 262.

2006

'Changed by the encounter': The learning and Change that Counsellors and Psychotherapists experience as a result of their client work . Paper presented at the annual School of Education Research Conference, Exeter University, 13th May.

2007

What two trainees have learnt from their client work: a co-operative self-search inquiry. Poster accepted for presentation at the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy Annual Research Conference, York, 11th May.

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Abbreviation

CSSI: Co-operative self-search inquiry

Chapter 1: Setting the Scene

‘The bounds of psychotherapy
make it possible for the analyst
to travel with the patient
on a voyage of discovery’

(Schaverien, 2002, p. 34).