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School of Arts and Sciences
The University of Notre Dame Australia

The meaning and personal significance of the small group experience for a group of recent graduates from the Bachelor of Counselling degree at the University of Notre Dame Australia

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BA (Hons) Psych, MA (Coun), DCG (Hons), MAPS, MPsSI

This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Counselling

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I declare that this is my own work and does not contain material that has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any academic or other institution.

I further declare that to the best of my knowledge this thesis does not contain material previously published or written by others except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis.

Martin Philpott

Candidate's Name   Date

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ABSTRACT

This research is a phenomenological study investigating the meaning and personal significance of the small group experience (personal growth) for a single cohort of eight mature-age graduates (male and female) who completed the Bachelor of Counselling degree at The University of Notre Dame Australia in the years 2005 and 2006. Two facilitators of these personal growth groups were interviewed, as were two agency supervisors who had access to these graduates during their clinical practice.

The research used qualitative methods in the collection of data. A semi-structured interview was conducted with purposefully selected participants to determine their understanding of the significance and meaning of experiential group participation. Methodology harnessed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis [IPA] as described by Smith (2003).

By investigating the phenomenon of the small group experience in counsellor training, greater understanding of its value or usefulness is highlighted. The findings of this qualitative study revealed the existence of the following themes: self-awareness; change; vulnerabilities; emotional experience; support; self-disclosure; feedback; challenges; risks; safety; facilitators; and the link to practice. The implications of these themes for counsellor education are discussed and suggestions for further research are offered.

These findings contribute to discussion on counsellor education and training of professional counsellors and therapists in Australia, in an attempt to improve the overall quality of members entering this very important and growing caring profession.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

As single authority systems are increasingly being challenged in the modern world, there is a growing demand from individuals to participate in shaping their own lives. One response to this need for personal control and personal growth can be seen in the development of the small group movement as people struggle for some understanding of the social milieu in which they find themselves. Groups such as encounter groups, self-help groups, therapeutic community groups, and sensitivity and other training groups have flourished. The small group experience that is the subject of this study has emerged from the development of such groups.

There has also been a significant increase in the emergence of counselling training programs that specifically prepare people to engage in a helping relationship. There is a significant variation in how counsellors are trained for this relationship. Some courses offered by the Australian Institute for Professional Counsellors, for example, are available by distance learning, where students are supplied with reading material linked to different modules in the curriculum. Other courses are very specific in their theoretical orientation and include preparation and training in particular approaches to counselling; for example, Gestalt therapy, Narrative therapy or Transactional Analysis. There are courses offered by universities within departments of psychology, education, arts and sciences, and social work.

The research conducted for this study examines the small group experiences of counselling graduates who have recently completed a course at undergraduate level at The University

of Notre Dame Australia in Fremantle, Western Australia. A large portion of this course is experientially based. The undergraduate course is offered over six semesters or three academic years. Two hours per week of each semester are allocated to personal growth or personal development training, suggesting that a high educational value is placed on the experience of small group participation. The purpose of the experiential group is to encourage self-awareness in the trainee counsellor through a process of self-disclosure and feedback. This process is challenging, but anecdotal evidence suggests that students find the small group experience supportive and meaningful.

The outcome of experiential activity in a small group setting is not easily measurable and the research that informs this activity in counsellor education is not plentiful (Williams & Irving, 1996, p. 171). However, the notions of personal growth and personal development aspects of counsellor preparation have been recognised as important for some time (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1996). Professional counselling interventions require the counsellor to have a certain element of self-knowledge that allows them to differentiate between their own emotional material and that belonging to the client. One of the ways to discover and become aware of personal issues is through participation in a personal growth group. The subjects investigated in this study were mature-age graduates (male and female) who had completed the Bachelor of Counselling degree at The University of Notre Dame Australia [UNDA] one or two years prior to the commencement of the study. The personal growth group that was examined was conducted on a weekly basis, facilitated by an expert practitioner, and was bounded by strict rules of confidentiality, sensitivity and respect. The activities within the group were organised in such a way that participants were encouraged to disclose personal issues in a safe and secure environment. Following this disclosure and

discussion, feedback was invited and given to the participants. It is through this feedback that the group members learn more about themselves and therefore gain self-awareness in a manner they would not otherwise have. This small group experience took place during each of the three years of the degree course completed by the participants. This research is an attempt to understand the meaning and personal significance that this kind of experiential group had for these graduates and to discover the effect (if any) on those who participated in this small group experience.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to identify how the participants experienced the small group activity. In particular, participants were offered an opportunity to say what meaning and significance the experiential group had for them. The information that this research has produced may be used to inform the program as to its effectiveness in increasing self-awareness for small group participants. There may also be implications for counsellor training in Australia if this method of counsellor preparation can be shown to be of value to the participants as individuals and as emerging professional counsellors According to Corey (2008), it is generally accepted that a counsellor who is self-aware is less likely to over identify with a client's issues and is more easily able to establish a therapeutic alliance with the client. The findings may help to facilitate or focus a discussion within the profession of the use of small group participation in the preparation of counsellors and therapists. In particular, the themes identified in this study might form the basis of further studies to determine if indeed these themes are common amongst all counsellors who have completed their training in professional courses for counselling. Not all training courses are

the same. Some are of one year's duration, most are two years in length and a few, including the course at The University of Notre Dame Australia, are of three years duration. It goes without saying, therefore, that the curriculum content of these courses will differ. The purpose of this study is to shed light on the meaning that the personal growth group experience had for these participants as part of the counselling course that they undertook.

The research questions asked in this study were as follows:

1. What is the meaning and personal significance for the participants in this study of having completed three years of personal growth in a small group?

2. What were the facilitators' experiences of how these participants embraced the process of personal growth?

3. What link is there between personal growth and subsequent counsellor practice as observed by agency supervisors?

1.2 Significance of the study

Currently in Australia, the education and training of counsellors and therapists is heavily weighted in favour of skills and knowledge, although there is an increasing awareness of the need to help students develop a therapeutic alliance with their clients. This therapeutic relationship is difficult to measure and often consists of non-specific factors such as openness, congruence, transparency, genuineness and respect on the part of the counsellor towards the client (Egan, 1998). There is no doubt that counselling is an interpersonal activity and is firmly anchored within a helping relationship. There is a copious amount of

information within scholarly works to describe what a helping relationship might be, with commentators including Corey (2008), Egan (1998), Gladding (2004), Hackney and Cormier (2005), and Miars and Halverson (2001). Capuzzi and Ross (2003) say that the relationship between counsellor and client is critical and "serves as the framework within which effective helping takes place" (p. 5). They acknowledge also the difficulty in categorically stating a definition or description of the helping relationship.

Regardless of the description used in the relationship or therapeutic alliance, it is always the case that the therapist is singularly motivated by the client's needs. The agenda is set by the client and the counsellor has only one goal: the enhancement and encouragement of client change. Capuzzi and Ross (2003) describe the following conceptualisation of the relationship:

- *The relationship is initially structured by the counsellor or therapist, but is open to cooperative restructuring based upon the needs of the client.*

- *The relationship begins with the initial meeting and continues through to termination.*

- *The persons involved in the relationship perceive the existence of trust, caring, concern, and commitment and act accordingly.*

- *The relationship provides for the personal growth of all persons involved.*

- *The relationship provides the safety needed for self exploration by all persons involved.*

- *The relationship promotes potential of all persons involved.* (p. 6)

Counselling, as an interpersonal activity, requires an effective practitioner to engage in empathic contact with the client. It is the contention of the author that this ability to empathise and make emotional contact can be developed through the small group experience of personal growth and this is the subject of the research. The counsellor who is not self-aware is less likely to be effective within the interpersonal relationship (Johns, 1998) that is so crucial to the intimate emotional process that occurs within counselling. This study offers an opportunity to gain an insider perspective on the phenomenon of personal growth and to gain an in-depth understanding of how the participants experienced this in pursuing their counsellor training at The University of Notre Dame Australia. This research is therefore about understanding the meaning and significance the participants give to the experience of being a member of a personal growth group as part of their training and provides insight as to what changes occurred, if any, for the participants in their development.

This study is especially significant, as it has been predicted that Australians will require counselling intervention at an increased rate of five per cent per annum over the next ten years (Monash Centre for Policy Studies, 1999). This means that there will be an increased need to produce counsellors to meet this demand. It is also predicted by the World Health Organization that by the year 2020, depression will be the greatest health problem worldwide (Arns & Sumich, 2007). Professionally trained counsellors will increasingly be asked to work with clients who have mental health issues in the future.

Counselling interventions, or talking therapies, are acknowledged as being effective in mental health issues (Brown & Srebalus, 1998; Corey, 2008; Egan 1998) and it is important

therefore that any insights into counselling education and training that this study might show be used to inform the profession as it develops and grows.

1.3 Counselling – an overview

The purpose of this section is to provide a general overview of counselling. The intention is to provide a description of counselling in terms of theories and approaches commonly in use and how these approaches are used in the delivery of counselling to clients who present, or are referred, to the profession.

The task of counselling as described by the British Association for Counselling and Therapy (1990) is to give the client an opportunity to explore, discover and clarify ways of living more satisfyingly and more resourcefully. It is an interpersonal process in which one person communicates to another that they are understood and respected. Counselling as a profession requires practitioners to follow a prescribed course of study to gain entry into the profession and have their names placed on a register, which is available to the public. These practitioners must hold membership of a professional body, sometimes called a competent authority, which regulates the profession and the behaviour of its members. These organisations provide a guide for ethical behaviour and have disciplinary or "fitness to practice" committees. In Australia, the peak professional and registration bodies for counselling are the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia and The Australian Counselling Association. While these are separate representative bodies they have recently come together to form a single registration body called The Australian register for counsellors and psychotherapists (ARCAP).

Counselling, says Gladding (2000), deals with personal, social, vocational, empowerment and educational concerns and counsellors work in areas in which they have a demonstrated expertise. These can include school or college adjustment, mental health, alcohol and other drugs, couples and family, general inability to cope and rehabilitation. Egan (1998) says that counselling is a process in which clients learn how to make decisions and formulate new ways of behaving, feeling and thinking. Counsellors focus on the goals the client wishes to achieve and the relationship between counsellor and client is critical. This relationship is sometimes referred to as the therapeutic alliance (Baer, Langhoff, Lindon & Zubraegel, 2008).

This concept of a therapeutic alliance is not an easy one to define, although the importance of the interpersonal nature of the relationship is emphasised throughout the literature and linked to treatment outcomes (Horvath & Symonds, 1991). The personal growth group that is the focus of this study is an activity that attempts to develop empathy, warmth, cooperation, transparency and structure as significant areas within the therapeutic alliance and is similar to the Rogerian concepts within a person-centred paradigm (Rogers, 1961).

Counselling is not about giving advice, although the term is used within the medical and legal professions as meaning precisely that, in relation to giving medical and legal advice. In the United States, for example, it is common to hear a lawyer referred to as a counselor. It is important therefore to be as specific as possible as to what is meant by counselling. There seems to be a general acceptance that counselling is meant to be in some sense a helpful and supportive activity. It is quite common in times of great tragedies and disasters (for example the 2002 terrorist bombings in Bali) to be informed in news bulletins that

survivors are receiving counselling. This is suggestive of some kind of helpful emotional or psychological intervention.

The term psychological counselling is commonly used in Britain and Ireland, and indeed the preparation and training for professional counsellors often, although not always, takes place in psychology departments of universities. There is also, as is the case at The University of Notre Dame Australia where this study was undertaken, a move to align counselling with mental health and well-being.

Egan (1998) suggests that counselling is an interpersonal process that has three stages:

1. Clients exploring and clarifying their problems or issues

2. Clients examining new perspectives and planning goals

3. The facilitation of action and support by the counsellor.

Counselling has three elements of importance:

1. The client and their problem or reason for referral

2. The counsellor and their knowledge and skills

3. The relationship between the client and the counsellor.

The above suggests that effective counsellors require some knowledge, skills or abilities to intervene with people in distress, some skill in the application of theories and methods, and an ability to establish and maintain a relationship with the client.

There is a popular view that an effective counsellor requires some self-knowledge or self-awareness (Holmes, 2005; Lazarus, 1993; Spinnelli, 1994). It is therefore important that the training of counsellors includes an attempt to create professionals who have the ability to establish a therapeutic alliance with their clients. Various approaches to experiential learning within counsellor education attempt to do this and it is often carried out as small group activities that enhance self-awareness in the participants. This is the approach taken by The University of Notre Dame Australia from which the participants in this study were purposefully sampled. There is debate within counsellor education and training as to whether, and in what manner, trainee counsellors should engage in their own therapy. Corey (2008) suggests that therapists serve as models for their clients and therefore should behave in ways other than just being technical experts. In other words, they should not hide behind their professional role. As Corey (2008) states,

> *It is through our own genuineness and aliveness that we can significantly touch our clients. If we make life oriented choices, radiate a zest for life and are real in our relationships with our clients, we can inspire them to develop these internal resources … this implies that we are willing to look at our lives and make the changes we want. Because we affirm that changing is worth the risk and the effort, we hold out hope to our clients that they can become their own person and can like the person they are becoming.* (p. 17)

The small group activity that is the subject of the present study is an attempt to bring about meaningful change in those who participate in the process called personal growth.

It is important though to offer first an overview of counselling and psychotherapy to place the training of counsellors in context. Wheeler and Janis (1980) suggest that the process of counselling involves a two-way interpersonal exchange and that the topic for discussion,

although agreed upon, is not limited. The emphasis is often on feelings as well as thoughts and behaviour, and the relationship is supportive, encouraging and affirming. In the United States, the more commonly used term for a counsellor is a therapist or psychotherapist. There is an element of theoretical knowledge, skills acquisition and personal development in how counsellors are professionally trained. It is the personal development aspect of training that is the focus of this study.

1.4　Common theories and approaches to counselling

This section discusses how counselling is conceptualised. Many theorists have described what they see as the core elements of counselling in an attempt to inform the emerging profession. This also includes informing the consumers of counselling about preparation and ethical and dutiful practice of the therapist.

The term counselling was first used by Carl Rogers in 1942 in an attempt to avoid conflict with the medical profession. Prior to this, psychotherapy was offered to those who were seen as sick and was almost always offered by a medical practitioner (Corey, 2008). Psychoanalytic psychotherapy was first introduced by Sigmund Freud (1949; concept originally introduced in 1896), a neurologist, whose influence in the area of therapy has been enormous. Freud's description of the human psyche continues to be influential today and he has many followers within the professions of counselling and psychotherapy who practice within a psychoanalytic framework. Freud first used the term Psychoanalysis in 1896. His approach was influential within the medical model and Descriptive Psychiatry and continues to position itself within this approach.

Freud offered a theoretical view of the human psyche consisting of three major systems. He named these systems the Id, Ego and Superego. These systems, said Freud, were different from each other, but worked in harmony to produce integrated behaviour. According to Freud (1949), we are born with a bundle of psychic energy that preconditions the individual to seek pleasure and avoid pain, discomfort or distress. This can be seen in the newborn baby who cries with discomfort and is satisfied when basic human needs are met. According to Freud, this is a manifestation of the Id and is totally unconscious.

The Superego is also unconscious and is the system concerned with proper living and correctness. It sets high ideals and standards and is critical of the pleasure-seeking focus of the Id. It is moralistic and punitive and is sometimes understood as being similar to the conscience. The Ego, described as the executive portion of personality, is both conscious and unconscious, and mediates between the Id and Superego to ensure appropriate behaviour.

Other important concepts attributed to Freud are human psychosexual development, the relevance of dreams, and the dynamics of transference and countertransference within therapy, which are still important aspects of psychoanalysis.

Those who follow a psychoanalytic approach have incorporated other theorists into their work. The significant influence of Carl Jung (1961), Melanie Klein (1960) and Alfred Adler (1938), as well as others, has been acknowledged (Corey, 2008) as important in understanding how modern psychodynamic approaches are practiced. The psychoanalytic approach sees the therapist as someone who can interpret unconscious material for the client and help them work through issues. Issues are often understood as having a

foundation in earlier stages of development, and discussion of the past is therefore important. How people are as adults is determined by their past and this is why the psychoanalytic approach is often described as being deterministic.

In traditional psychoanalytic approaches, the relationship with the client was not emphasised, and indeed Freud himself would sit at the head of the couch behind the patient. The patient was encouraged to express themself using a technique called free association. This is when the patient is encouraged to state freely whatever comes into consciousness. These expressions are then interpreted by the therapist and fed back to the patient, thereby hopefully increasing self-awareness.

It was much later, when Rogers (1961) described the notion of person- or client-centred therapies, that the idea of a relationship came to be seen as important within the therapeutic process. Since then, the idea of relationship has moved very much to centre stage, with most theorists accepting that the relationship between therapist and client is of paramount importance (Beck, 1987; Corey, 2008; Lazarus, 1993). The importance given to this relationship is reflected in the following statement from the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (2006):

> *Psychotherapy and Counselling are professional activities that utilise an interpersonal relationship to enable people to develop understanding about themselves, and to make changes in their lives … Professional psychotherapists and counsellors work within a clearly contracted, principled relationship that enables individuals to obtain assistance in exploring and resolving issues of an interpersonal, intrapsychic, or personal nature.*(p. 7)

Following the emphasis on the client rather than the therapist that developed in the 1960s, other theories emerged in an attempt to explain or clarify what the counselling process should be like. Existential therapy (Frankl, 1967; May, 1961; Spinelli, 1994) emphasised the importance of meaning for the client (and therapist) as a very important part of the counselling process. This was the beginning of an emphasis on the relationship between therapist and client, and this has been a focus of great interest ever since.

Behaviour was emphasised by those who favoured a scientific approach, where theories were empirically tested in an attempt to maintain credibility within the scientific framework. Attempts to measure outcomes were, and are still, considered important. It is from this approach that cognitive behaviour therapy (Beck, 1987; Ellis, 1955; Lazarus, 1989; Meichenbaum, 1985) became one of the most influential models of therapy in the Western world. This approach states that the feelings and behaviours that cause problems for clients have their roots in faulty thinking. Therapy, therefore, is concerned with changing thinking patterns, which it often does through the use of cognitive restructuring or frank disputation (Ellis, 1973). New thinking is then likely to change feelings and behaviours. This approach is very different from those that focus on the past and earlier developmental periods.

Other influential theories and approaches to counselling and psychotherapy include Gestalt therapy as described by Perls (1969) and Choice theory (Glasser, 2000). Gestalt therapy emphasises what is happening in the present or the "here and now" and not the past. As such it is existential in orientation. The client is encouraged to experience feelings "in the present moment", and the influence that these feelings have on the body becomes very

relevant in helping the client towards awareness (Perls, 1969). Feelings are very important in this approach.

Choice theory, meanwhile, challenges the client with regard to their behaviour (Glasser, 2000). "What are you doing?" as a challenging question to the client can be heard over and over within the therapy sessions so that the client can gain insight and appreciate that current behaviour is maladaptive (Glasser, 2000). Behaviour change is seen as an attempt to produce more effective ways of living and regaining control of one's life. Therefore, according to Glasser (2000), counselling interventions are about helping clients to make better choices in life.

More recently, new variations on existing approaches have emerged. For example, Narrative therapy (White, 1995), Mindfulness (Orzech, 2007) and Attachment theory (Hughes, 2007) are now becoming popular in Australia. However, it is important to note that Attachment theory made a major contribution to psychological interventions half a century ago in North America and the United Kingdom and mindfulness has been a part of the Buddhist practice for more than two millennia. A resurgence rather than an emergence might therefore describe the increasing popularity of these approaches.

Most present day approaches to counselling embody three domains relating to the human condition. These are cognition, affect and behaviour. Those who present for counselling typically require support with all of these. In recognising this, the profession has moved in recent times towards an eclectic approach and an integration of theories in an attempt to better explain what is happening for clients in distress. Lazarus (1989), for instance, describes what he terms a "technical eclecticism", which is an approach that aims to

include and treat concurrently all aspects of the client's behaviour, thinking and feelings, together with any physical changes that may be occurring.

It is this comprehensive and all-inclusive approach to counselling and psychotherapy that enjoys most popularity today. Within this approach, there is room for all theories and approaches. Early childhood experiences, as well as present experiences and feelings, are all seen as relevant to how the client is understood. The expression of feelings in therapy is seen as valuable in a cathartic way with the release of emotional energy. This potentially leads to greater feelings of well-being as the client is encouraged and supported in therapy.

Many of the earlier concepts described by Freud (1949) continue to be influential, in that they are used to describe the process of counselling and to explain what happens in the client-therapist encounter. Transference, countertransference and resistance are described as important events within the therapeutic process.

Transference is when the client emotionally engages the therapist in a manner that is related to a "significant other" in the client's life (e.g. a parent or teacher). This is often at an unconscious level and the client has no awareness of it. Countertransference is when a similar occurrence takes place with the therapist who is often equally unaware that it is taking place. It is for this reason that supervision of counsellors is so important. Counsellors unpack what happens for them in counselling with their supervisor and gain insight into their reactions to their clients in counselling sessions.

Resistance is anything that stops the client from engaging with therapy and embracing the process in a non-defensive manner. It may well be that it is something the counsellor is doing or not doing that influences the client and the process in a way that results in

resistance. It would be a difficult task to make any conclusions about this, especially as all clients come to counselling with a different agenda or set of issues and are facilitated differently by each counsellor.

Behaviour is also seen as an important part of a psycho-educational or coaching input by the counsellor and this approach, using a combination of cognitive and behavioural approaches, is very popular and widely used in Australia.

It is rarely possible to predict what happens in the counselling room and while most clients attend an average of four sessions, there are some clients who require further intervention. The length of time spent in therapy is often used as a justification to name the experience as counselling or psychotherapy. There is ongoing debate within the domain of counselling and psychotherapy about whether or not the two terms should be used interchangeably. There is much discussion regarding this issue and it sometimes causes confusion for clients and counsellors alike.

There are many theories that attempt to explain counselling and psychotherapy. Some suggest that there are in excess of 400 theoretical approaches (Corsini & Wedding, 2000; Gabbard, 2000). However, these approaches are, in most cases, variations of a smaller number of themes. These are psychodynamic, humanistic, cognitive/behavioural, transpersonal and systemic theories (Corey, 2008). The understanding that counsellors have of their clients is crucial within the helping relationship if effective outcomes are to be achieved. These theoretical models help counsellors gain an understanding of their clients against the several conceptual frameworks offered by the many different models and approaches.

Corey (2008) suggests that a spectrum of helping exists. At one end of the spectrum might be shorter-term help called counselling, while a movement along the spectrum to deeper work, which involves more sessions, might be called psychotherapy. People often present for counselling in times of crisis in their lives, and when the crisis passes they no longer feel the need for counselling. Clients do refer to the interpersonal support they receive as being critical to positive outcomes (King, 2005). Clients mention warmth, acceptance, feeling heard, being allowed to express themselves and feeling understood as the important things for them within the counselling relationship (Corey, 2008). It is therefore the client who determines the potential success or otherwise of counselling.

The traditional method of training counsellors has focussed on counselling skills and counselling theories. There has not been a great emphasis on the personal development of the counsellor, and yet there is increasing evidence that the relationship between client and counsellor makes the greatest difference to client outcomes (Corey, 2008; Dryden, 1991; Johns, 1998; Lazarus, 1993). This presents current counselling and psychotherapy educators with a great challenge as to how to prepare their students in a way that emphasises the importance of the relationship. The task appears to be how to teach the person-centred traits of unconditional positive regard, advanced empathy and congruence. Rogers (1961) says these traits are the necessary and sufficient conditions for effective counselling intervention and are critical to the client-counsellor relationship or the therapeutic alliance.

Rogers (1961) refers to concreteness and a transparency in which the counsellor is present in a real and tangible way with the client, and suggests this way of being present with the client is sufficient to increase levels of awareness and bring about meaningful change for

the client. It is a challenge for educators in counselling to find a way to teach these traits of openness, congruence, transparency, advanced empathy and genuineness in a manner that allows the counsellor to engage with the client in a positive, authentic and supportive manner. One method of training that is becoming increasingly popular in Australia is described as "experiential learning". This technique sometimes uses small personal development or personal growth groups to teach the Rogerian qualities outlined above, or at the very least to model them as a useful way of establishing rapport and connection with the client and for the establishment of the therapeutic alliance. This type of experiential learning is encouraged by the professional bodies in counselling; for example, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, the American Counselling Association and the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia. However, it is often not specified as to how this type of approach should be taught or facilitated. This leads to confusion, as different training institutions often have different interpretations of what form this kind of learning should take. Some schools insist on personal therapy, while others engage students in small group exercises to enhance interpersonal relationship skills and group cohesion. Still others put a small group structure in place that facilitates personal growth work that addresses emotional aspects of the student's life, which results in the participant receiving feedback that increases their self awareness.

Experiential learning is neither curriculum-based nor subject-bound, although there can be some structure. The value of this small group approach is the experience itself. This type of learning is conducted in small groups (usually no more than 12 members) and has the explicit aim of facilitating personal awareness within the participants. Members of the group are encouraged to disclose personal issues to the other members who, in turn, offer

feedback to them in a constructive, non-critical and non-threatening manner. Communication is interpersonal and sensitive within this type of group. The effect of this participation is that the group members learn more about themselves. The small group experience helps to create an enduring personal awareness in the trainee counsellor. It is, as Cooley (1902) describes it, like learning about oneself through the mirror of other people.

This self-awareness on the part of the counsellor is one of the non-specific factors in the counselling relationship that brings about the greatest change in the client (King, 2005). Other non-specific factors, says King (2005), include authenticity, empathy and a high regard for the well-being of the client. Self-awareness on the part of the therapist allows the counsellor to be more authentic, transparent and congruent (Rogers, 1961). Personal awareness also enables the counsellor to be more objective when presented with client problems in a clinical setting (Johns, 1998). The therapeutic alliance as described by Baer et al. (2008) is now considered a critical aspect in counselling and has been the subject of considerable research in various counselling and psychotherapeutic settings (Barber, 2000; Castonguay, 1996; Cottraux et al., 1995; Gaston, 1991; Loeb et al., 2005; Newman & Strauss, 2003; Vogel, Hansen, Stiles & Gotestan, 2006). This relationship or alliance has even been examined regarding on-line psychotherapy by Knaev-elstrud and Maercker (2006). There can be little doubt therefore as to the importance of this concept in counsellor education and professional preparation.

One of the main challenges for counselling educators is to offer a curriculum for counselling students that will bring about specific outcomes of an interpersonal nature and allow the counsellor to develop this therapeutic alliance more effectively. It is the "experiential personal growth group" that tries to help students develop a greater self-awareness, a greater ability to empathise and to be more effective in creating this very important relationship with the client. It is this small group experience that is the focus of this study.

1.5   Counsellor education and training

Counsellor education and training is about the preparation of sensitive professionals, skilled in the process of counselling. Hackney and Cormier (2005) suggest that this process can serve to enhance the lives of those seeking to change, to develop greater self-understanding, or to learn how to anticipate and meet life challenges.

The professional counsellor facilitates this activity and requires education and training to acquire knowledge and skills. Counsellors also require a considerable level of self-awareness. This professional preparation is of crucial importance and is by no means standardised throughout the world. There is, however, general agreement that skills acquisition and an in-depth knowledge of the human condition are essential for engaging in the process of counselling (Johns, 1998). Important areas of study include specific disciplines like developmental and abnormal psychology, as well as theories and methods of counselling. The disciplines within psychology serve to advance the knowledge required by students of counselling regarding the human person.

Developmental psychology is important so students can understand that lifespan development is a continuum and that counselling interventions will vary depending on the chronological age of the client. For example, a boy aged ten years who is unable to sleep, is having problems at school, and who has abdominal pain due to witnessing his parents argue, will require a different approach to counselling than a man aged 50 years whose wife has died of breast cancer. A specific understanding of human development will enhance the core elements of counselling interventions in these different cases.

Abnormal psychology helps the student counsellor to appreciate the psychiatric classification of mental illness and serves as a guide as to when a client may need to be referred to a psychiatrist. This may be especially critical if a client has a thought disorder and is misperceiving reality. It is important therefore to have a clear understanding of the theoretical basis that underlies the human condition in terms of what is seen as pathological. Counselling is also a skills-based activity. Counselling texts will often refer to the interpersonal nature of counselling and will specifically outline the skills of open-ended questioning, empathic listening, use of silence, goal setting and other skilled activities (Corey, 2008; Egan, 1998; Geldard & Geldard, 2001; Teybor, 2006).

It is within these areas that professional counsellors are trained. But not only professionally trained counsellors can be helpers. Nystul (2003) refers to informal as well as formal helpers. Informal helpers may have no formal professional training, but often share certain qualities with professional counsellors, such as being caring, non-judgmental and intuitive. It is also common for the caring professions – for example, medicine, nursing and teaching – to access counselling skills training in their preparation courses, although these

professionals would not see themselves as counsellors in the same way as a nursing mother would not see herself as a nurse.

Nystul (2003) also suggests that there are ways in which professionally trained or formal counsellors differ from informal helpers. For example, counsellors can maintain a degree of objectivity due to not being directly involved in the life of the client. Informal helpers usually have a relationship of some sort with the client and the help that they offer may involve a personal bias. In these cases, boundaries sometimes become blurred and the non-professionally trained counsellor can become emotionally involved and lose objectivity.

In addition, counsellors usually do not have a preconceived idea as to how a client should behave and therefore are open to trying different approaches. Counsellors are also bound by a professional code of ethics designed to protect the rights and sensitivities of the client. It is often the responsibility of the counsellor to challenge the client regarding their behaviour and this may be difficult for informal helpers to do, because of the risk to the relationship.

Finally, there is a difference between the formal and informal helper in terms of the repertoire of skills and understandings that the counsellor acquires through the training they receive. Brammer (1999) developed a helping formula as follows: Personality of the Helper + Helping Skills = Growth-Facilitating Conditions = Specific Outcomes.

Mutual trust, respect and openness between counsellor and client are what characterise these growth-facilitating conditions (Brammer, 1999). When such conditions exist, desirable outcomes are likely to emerge from the counselling process. This is similar to the necessary and sufficient conditions to bring about effective change described by Rogers (1961). These conditions are unconditional positive regard, congruence and accurate

empathetic understanding. These, says Rogers (1961), are counsellor attributes that influence the process of counselling in a positive manner.

There is increasing evidence to suggest that the personal characteristics of the counsellor play a critical role in the efficacy of counselling (Combs et al., 1986; Corey, Corey & Callanan, 2003; Corey, 2008; Herman, 1993). Furthermore, Corey (2008) advises that the central technique of counselling is the use of self as an instrument to bring about change. The idea is that the counsellor uses their own personality to encourage, believe in and support the client. Rogers (1961) goes further in suggesting that the client's perception of the counsellor is far more important than counselling theories and methods.

The traditional method of educating counsellors in Australia has been in the area of knowledge and skills (and by and large this appears to be done well within the institutions that provide counsellor training). This training takes place in universities, TAFE colleges and other organisational settings such as the Institute for Professional Counsellors, the Institute for Gestalt Therapy and the Institute for Transactional Analysis, as well as other less well-known approaches that offer training in expressive therapies such as Sandplay therapy, Art therapy and Hakomi training. However, if as King (2005) suggests, the non-specific factors within the counselling relationship are of such critical importance, then it is necessary to look at additional methods of training that will address these factors. These "non-specific factors" include empathy, unconditional positive regard, congruence, authenticity, compassion and whole attention. When counsellors can be present for their clients in a safe, trusting environment it is these very factors that become more important than models or theoretical orientations in counselling. This is the essence of the "client-centred approach" as described by Rogers (1961). It is these non-specific factors, and how

to develop them, that are the focus of the personal growth groups in the present study. Another term that has become popular to refer to this counsellor-client relationship is "the therapeutic alliance", as described by Baer et al. (2008).

Johns (1998) says that institutions that do not address the personal relationship with clients in their preparation of counsellors may be guilty of creating a training deficit. This deficit in training has been acknowledged in the northern hemisphere for some time, and has been addressed by using experiential learning techniques in a small group setting. This approach is generally accepted as a worthwhile and efficient method of training counsellors and is referred to as personal development or personal growth in counsellor training (Johns, 1998). Unfortunately, few studies have investigated the effects of these groups and a search of the literature yielded none using qualitative design. This will be discussed further in the literature review in Chapter 2.

The relationship within counselling is a caring one on the part of the professional counsellor. Fromm (1934), writing in an era of non-inclusive language, suggested the following were qualities of a caring relationship:

- Care or concern for one's fellow man

- Respect for him as a person

- Knowledge of him and his needs

- A sense of responsibility in helping him to meet those needs

- A genuineness on the counsellor's part and intention to help

- A warm acceptance of the client

- A desire and sensitivity to hear their story.

If these qualities are present, the client's experience of counselling is more likely to be a positive one (Fromm, 1934). It is these qualities that the personal growth group attempts to foster and facilitate. In its review of course recognition, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (1995) states clearly that counsellor training courses must provide for regular and systematic approaches to self-awareness work that are congruent with course rationale. The Association does not, however, say what form this self-awareness work should take. It is also interesting to note that the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia [PACFA] is currently investigating which training programs are using therapy as part of the training process and more specifically how this is being done. This is likely to result in some changes to training programs as new guidelines on training standards emerge. The Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia has already directed that personal development for counsellor trainees is essential for proper preparation into the profession. It may also come about that experiential group activity will be a requirement for course accreditation.

1.6   Experiential groups at UNDA

Education using the small group experience is not constrained by a rigid curriculum framework. In fact, it is not really structure-bound and is often difficult to assess. However, there is evidence to show that the experience does have a (usually) positive effect on the

participants and that they value the outcomes (Johns, 1998; Armstrong et al., 2006; Yalom, 1995).

This type of small group has been used in counsellor training programs in Europe and the west coast of the United States for several years and is now becoming more common in Australia. It is important for students of counselling to be able to reflect on and examine their thinking, emotional or feeling states and their behaviours in relation to various situations and other people. The unit of study called Personal Growth Group (Appendix I), which is a compulsory unit for all counsellors in training at The University of Notre Dame Australia, is experientially based and involves participating in a weekly group, facilitated by a professionally trained therapist experienced in group facilitation. In particular, students are encouraged to express and examine their emotional responses within the group. They are required to keep a personal reflective journal about their participation in the group. In this way, they can explore personal issues that may interfere with good practice. This small group experience provides these students with an opportunity to explore aspects of interpersonal communication. The participants are provided with a facility to practice respectful interpersonal communication skills in relation to making "I" statements, giving feedback, challenging others and dealing with conflict within the group.

The stated expected outcomes of these personal growth groups are as follows:

- A greater understanding of yourself and your responses to others

- A sensitivity to the emotional states of other group members

- Awareness of personal issues that may cause potential blocks in relation to good practice

- Greater skills in interpersonal communication

- Skills in giving and receiving feedback

- Skills in challenging others with respect and not causing defensiveness

- Understanding the concept of congruence

- Increased awareness, respect, and acceptance of others.

The rationale for using small group participation in training is that the participants learn about themselves as a result of peer feedback in a small group setting.

The idea of the Looking Glass Self can be attributed to Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929), a sociologist who, according to Coser (1997), was significantly influenced by William James (1890). James made a significant contribution to much of the thinking behind qualitative psychology due to his descriptions of the stream of consciousness as well as his analysis of the idea of "self". Cooley argued (cited in Coser, 1997) that:

… a person's self grows out of a person's commerce with others. The social origin of his life comes by the pathway of intercourse with other persons … there is no sense of "I" without its cor-relative sense of you, he, or they … each to each a looking glass, reflects the other that doth pass … as we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be, so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it. (pp. 305–307)

Mead (1934), when commenting on the "Looking Glass Self" described by Cooley, said:

… by placing both phases of this social process in the same consciousness, by regarding the self as the ideas entertained by others of the self, and other as the ideas entertained of him by the self, the action of the others upon the self and the self upon the others becomes simply the interaction of ideas upon each other within mind. (p. 287)

Perception of others within the small group described in this study is accompanied by "feedback" on that perception to participants in the group who disclose personal, and sometimes intimate, details of themselves and significant others in their lives. The feedback is always offered in a helpful or supportive manner. The group member may decline the offer and the group moves on to other issues. If the person agrees to listen to the feedback, it is offered using "I" statements. An example of this might be when a participant discloses that they feel abused by their partner due to ongoing criticism and some violence within the relationship. Feedback might be offered by a group member as follows:

I notice that you said that this abuse has been a feature in many of your past relationships and I am just wondering what it is that is keeping you in an abusive relationship such as this?

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Communication within the group is always respectful and interpersonal. The group facilitator is charged with the responsibility of outlining the ground rules and specifically ensuring that participants feel safe in their self-disclosure. This includes ensuring that no bullying takes place in the group and also on occasion suggesting a referral to a therapist outside the university if this is considered necessary.

The group often begins with a reflection or a projective exercise where participants are encouraged to "take thought" and become aware of how they are feeling. They may be asked to engage in an activity where they recall an event that has caused them to feel vulnerable and to share this with the group. Alternatively, they may be asked to participate in an exercise using imagery where they are offered their "heart's desire" by a stranger as they walk along a pathway in the forest. The group will often begin with a progressive relaxation exercise so that participants are more comfortable in disclosing about themselves.

There is a gentle invitation to participate and participants in the group will engage with the process in different ways and to varying extents. Participants in this group are encouraged to become aware of their emotional responses within the group and to share their thoughts and feelings with their contemporaries. Each student keeps a reflective journal where they write following their reflection on the group process. Learning to relate to other group members interpersonally provides excellent practice and preparation for interaction with clients. This is especially true in the areas of giving and receiving feedback, challenging, supporting and resolving conflict.

Confidentiality is discussed and contracts are made, and signed, to protect the vulnerabilities of the students. Ground rules and boundaries are explicitly stated during the establishment of the group and issues discussed include tolerance and respect for fellow members. Students participate in personal development each semester for six semesters over three years. Trained group practitioners, who hold at least a Master's degree in Counselling, Counselling Psychology, Social Work or Occupational Therapy, facilitate these groups. In all cases, the facilitators used to manage these groups have additional training in specific group-oriented approaches to counselling. Examples of these include Gestalt therapy, group client-centred therapy and psychodynamic approaches. Self-awareness is the goal of such experience in counsellor education, with the additional specific intention of creating empathic, sensitive and mature graduates who can establish the therapeutic alliance referred to by Baer et al. (2008).

Assessment of this group activity includes the following, and is evaluated via the content of the reflective journal and facilitator comments which assesses the student's capacity to understand the personal challenge and growth that has occurred:

1. Progress in personal growth. At the beginning of each group, students identify areas for personal growth and report on their progress as to their increased self-awareness at the end of their year of study.

2. Peer assessment, where participants give summative feedback to others which includes reference to participation in the group and the perceptions each group member has of the other. This can sometimes be a sensitive activity and great care must be taken by the group facilitator to ensure that feedback is respectful. In some

situations this might be offered as a comment on perceived strengths and suggested areas for development.

3. Awareness of group process, where students are able to describe what happened in the group in cognitive terms. This refers to an understanding on the part of the participants of how the dynamics in the group unfolded. This processing takes place after the group has completed the experiential session.

This unit is not graded in a manner where marks are allocated and each student receives a non-graded pass as a result. However, individual comments are provided to each student by the facilitator and these are of an encouraging and supportive nature. The purpose of the group is to raise personal awareness and identify issues (sometimes referred to as "blocks") that might inhibit the capacity to be present, helpful and facilitating of others

There is also a very similar unit of study offered by Jansen Newman Institute of Counselling and Psychotherapy in New South Wales (Appendix II), whose method of delivery involves participation in a small group context. This unit is offered for 21 hours, three hours each week for six weeks, and while very much shorter than the training under examination in the present study (156 hrs) it is nevertheless very similar in structure. The existence of this model elsewhere lends credence to the acceptance of the model under consideration by the profession generally.

1.7   Self-awareness

Self-awareness through personal development training is thought to be a necessary part of counsellor education and training. Andolfi (1996), Aponte (1992), Bernard and Goodyear (1997), Bradley (1989), Gee (1996) and Haber (1996) all refer to three major advantages of personal development training. Firstly, student counsellors can learn at two levels: the personal and the professional. Secondly, each personal issue emerging in the personal development group can be processed in a socio-cognitive manner; and finally, group facilitators will flag personal issues that emerge from student counsellors which might interfere with or be related to client issues. If the facilitator deems it necessary, a group participant will be referred to counselling outside the group. This is an important point because the group is a training, rather than a therapy, group. However, Johns (1998) is of the view that it may be easier to say that this type of group is not a therapy group than to ensure that it does not in fact become one. It is for this reason that selection of group facilitators is so critical. In the case of The University of Notre Dame Australia counselling discipline, all facilitators have specific training in group therapy and group facilitation and all are experienced and practicing clinicians. Group participants are advised very clearly that the small group experience is not therapy and that those requiring therapy will be referred to a therapist outside of the group.

Alongside theories and skills training, there is an additional dimension within the counselling process concerned with the human factor or the interpersonal relationship between counsellor and client. Interpersonal communication protocols require counsellors to possess more than just knowledge and skills. All counsellors are different from each other and possess unique personalities. Personality refers to the characteristic ways in

which a person views the world and themselves in it. It refers to individual ways of thinking, behaving and responding that make each person different from others. Counsellors as persons also differ one from the other and will learn differently. Some may be very intuitive. Others may find empathy easier to develop, and while there are specific skills in counselling that can be taught – for example, the use of open-ended questions, use of silence, suggesting collaboration, giving feedback and facilitating the expression of emotion – the teaching of the therapeutic alliance is more challenging for counsellor educators. It is this dimension of the "self" as counsellor that is the focus of the present study

The desire and quest for self-knowledge and the hope for personal growth are not unique to counselling. Philosophers and scribes throughout the ages have focussed on the essential mysteries of human nature. The Greek philosopher Socrates, in the fifth century BC, said "The unexamined life is not worth living". Literature includes reference to thinkers who have been preoccupied with self-understanding, the meaning of life, and the pleasures and pain of interpersonal relationships as well as personal journeys through life.

More recently, the disciplines of education, mental health, social work and other service professions have included the concepts of self-awareness, self-discovery and attitudes in their training programs. There appears to be a growing acceptance that personal values inform (often implicitly) a person's behaviour and can often also distort perceptions of reality. Johns (1998) contends that one of the great tasks in life is to develop personal awareness. Rogers (1961) suggests "The degree to which I can create relationships which facilitate the growth of others as separate persons is a measure of the growth I have achieved myself" (p. 64). There is also attention being paid to interpersonal skills, personal

attitudes and values in medical training, along with a greater focus on the central importance of the relationship between clinician and patient or client (Maguire and Pitceathly, 2002). The clinical skills training at The University of Notre Dame Australia's School of Medicine now includes interpersonal relationship training as well as self-reflection, critical incident debriefing and teaching such skills as "how to give bad news".

Satir (1978) refers to the value of building self-esteem and self-confidence through personal development and also mentions two other facets that are relevant to personal development in counsellor training. The first of these is that those who help others to grow also grow themselves. The second facet identified by Satir (1978) is that personal development in our culture has tended to champion the so-called feminine qualities of intuition, feelings and aesthetics. These can provide a balance to the traditional "masculine" traits of logic, order, pragmatism and analysis. Hemming (1977) saw personal development as a search for wholeness and the neglected parts of the self, and argued, along with Morris (1977), for the need to develop "right brain" functions of sensitivity, imagination and creativity. This also means discovering a sense of destruction and hostility, as well as the capacity for fear. This is often referred to as the shadow side of being human, which counsellors have to work with in their clients and themselves. The theme of the shadow was described by Carl Jung (1961) who was a contemporary of Freud in the early part of the twentieth century. His ideas are still influential and there are many therapists who describe themselves as Jungian analysts.

If, as Johns (1998) suggests, self-awareness and personal development are significant in life in general, then they must be at least equally important in counselling. There are very few, if any, approaches that do not acknowledge the relationship between counsellor and client

as being of central significance (McLeod, 1993). It is difficult to argue that a consistent and ongoing struggle for self-awareness, self-understanding and self-acceptance should not be an essential, if not a pre-eminent factor, in counsellor education and training (Johns, 1998). Personal development or personal growth is a purposeful activity. It is carried out with the service of clients in mind, and always within ethical principles and parameters.

Dryden and Thorne (1991) suggest that "an unaware counsellor leading an unexamined life is likely to be a liability rather than an asset" (p. 20). Likewise, Johns (1998) suggests that in order to have a full and satisfying existence, personal awareness and self-knowledge are core to any sensitive person's professional development. The emphasis in counsellor education today is more about stressing the behaviour and values of the counsellor than about theories and counselling skills. King (2005), for example, says that it is the relationship between client and counsellor, and the dynamics within that relationship, that are likely to influence the outcome of the counselling intervention. This is called the therapeutic alliance, and it is crucial that the counsellor is able to reflect on themselves and have an awareness of who they are as individuals and how they interact with their clients in the establishment of this alliance.

Corey (2008) suggests the counsellor-client relationship is the most important factor fostering growth. It is therefore important to look at what the desirable or required qualities of counsellors might be. He suggests that important qualities include:

- transparency, or being real and authentic. This is where the client is comfortable with the counsellor being visible and honest

- empathy, or a feeling with the client. This is sometimes referred to a togetherness

- congruence, or being a genuine person and integrated as a whole person

- unconditional positive regard, or a bracketing of judgement by the counsellor regardless of the strengths or otherwise manifested by the client

- respecting the client's ability to set the agenda. (p. 16)

Corey (2008) also refers to the challenges that neophyte counsellors are likely to face as they begin their professional lives. These are posed in the form of questions:

- How do we use ourselves as a therapeutic person? If I accept that my "self" is the central tool that I possess in this relationship, what should I do to use that?

- How do I become honest about my limitations? What do I say to clients regarding my level of experience?

- What do I do with clients who are slow to commit? How do I or should I persuade them to embrace therapy?

- How do I take care of myself in this activity? Am I able to ensure that I have supervision of my client work and how it affects me?

- How do I deal with issues regarding being alive, being real, and being a worthy role model? (p. 28).

All of the qualities and skills mentioned above, and the questions listed for reflection, have direct relevance to how we educate counsellors for practice. In addition to the skills training and exposure to the many different counselling models, there is a strong argument for counsellor education to include personal development or self-awareness training.

According to Johns (1998), there are two central questions to be asked of oneself as personal development begins: "Who am I?" and "Who can I be for others?" "Who am I?" is always a challenging question and not easy to deal with. The challenge is linked to the risk one takes in providing the answer – there may be a risk of exposure, rejection or judgement. These feelings are uncomfortable to experience and are therefore often avoided. In personal development training or personal growth, there is an attempt to understand oneself better. One of the exercises used in this context is an attempt to expand self and other awareness.

"Who can I be for others?" is a critical question for counsellors to ask of themselves. The position of the counsellor within the relationship will require the professional to reveal themselves to the client as a person who is real and concrete, empathic, understanding and supportive, and who is not bringing their personal agenda to the process. To be able to engage in this disclosure of self effectively requires much self-awareness and self-knowledge. The central purpose of the small personal growth group is to facilitate such awareness.

Corey (2008) says that:

> *The discussion regarding the counsellor as a therapeutic person raises issues often debated within counsellor education: whether people should be required to participate in counselling or therapy before they become practitioners. My view is that counsellors can benefit greatly from the experience of being clients at some time. Such exploration can increase your level of self awareness. This experience can be obtained before training, during it, or both, but I strongly support some form of personal explorations as vital preparation in learning to counsel others.* (p. 19)

It is important for a full understanding of the personal growth group that certain (often taken for granted) terms are clearly spelled out. These terms include personal development, personal growth, self-awareness and empathy. These will be expanded upon in the review of the literature in Chapter 2. It may be a mistake to assume that individuals will have similar understandings of these terms and make the same assumptions with regard to them.

1.8   The concept of self

Egan (1986) argued that the human organism seems capable of enduring anything in the universe except a clear, complete, fully conscious view of oneself as one actually is. Concomitantly, Sidney Jourard (1964) said "when a man does not acknowledge to himself who, what, and how he is, he is out of touch with reality and he will sicken and die" (p. 76). However, there is no single method that can be used to define what the self is; instead, several philosophical, religious and theoretical approaches try to explain the concept.

There does appear to be a belief in the notion of "always and ever changing". This is what Heraclitus (544–484 BC), the pre-Socratic philosopher, meant when he said "we cannot step twice into the same stream". There is always movement and there is always flux. Similarly, Abraham Maslow (1970) used the term "self actualisation", while Rogers (1961) referred to the fully functioning person as one who is "becoming", developing or emerging. Existentialist philosophers and therapists also believe that people can make sense of life through the exploration of meaning, and that persons are flexible and self-fulfilling. Wall (1977) suggests that people are made of many selves and must come to terms with the fact that the self is not a single entity. He says persons have a social self, a sexual self, a philosophical self, a physical self and a moral self, suggesting that the concept of self is quite complex and not easily defined or understood.

Other models of the self include those explanations attempted by Freud (1949), Jung (1961) and Perls (1969), among others. The fact that there are so many explanations of the self available allows educators in counsellor training to embrace the concept of self-development in counsellor training with flexibility, openness and acceptance of diverse views. This flexibility also allows for the celebration of the uniqueness of each person, and also of persons in relation to others.

Self-knowledge and self-awareness are suggested as factors that constitute growth within this context of counsellor training. The focus in the personal growth group is very much on the use of "I" statements from the participants. While conversation is interpersonal, the individual speaks in the present, an approach Perls (1969) describes as "the here and now" or self-expression "in this moment".

The content of the personal growth group is not defined, prescribed or outlined for participants. There are many aspects of a person's personal life that can be relevant to the content for discussion. These can include:

- current family life, as well as one's family of origin

- past experiences and achievements

- a sense of one's own position in the world. This includes strengths, weaknesses and opportunities

- vulnerabilities, personal fears and anxieties

- relationships

- wishes and dreams for the future.

These (and other) issues are frequently the content focus within the personal growth group. The ongoing challenge for participants in these groups is to value the necessary and sufficient conditions for change as described by Rogers (1964). These are genuineness, congruence, acceptance or unconditional positive regard, and empathy. A helpful model to understand the several aspects of ourselves is the Johari Window.

1.9 The Johari Window

The Johari Window is a disclosure/feedback model that participants can use to disclose things about themselves in order to inform others about them The Johari Window is based

on the following concept: "There are things I know and don't know about myself. And there are things others know and don't know about me". It can also be used to invite and receive feedback from others, which will provide information not previously known to them. It was designed by two American psychologists, Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham (1955) and represents an amalgam of their first names. It was first used at The Western training laboratory in California in 1955 and involves the following specific aspects:

- Individual members of a group can build trust between each other by disclosing personal information.

- Participants can learn about themselves and come to terms with issues of a personal nature following feedback from other members of the group.

Figure 1: *The Johari Window*

		SELF	
		Known	*Unknown*
OTHERS	*Known*	The Public or Open Arena	The Blind Spot
	Unknown	The Hidden Arena or Façade	The Unknown

1.9.1 The Public Arena

This is the arena known to the self and others – an individual's physical qualities, what they do for a living (mostly), their recreational activities (mostly) and so on. These are the things an individual knows about themselves and is prepared to reveal to others. The more they know about themselves and show to others, the larger this area becomes. Where communication of self is open, and defensiveness is low, the area is large by comparison. However, wisdom demands the extent of the openness. The extent of communication and defensiveness that is needed to protect oneself is balanced by a wisdom that invites forethought prior to revelation.

1.9.2 The Blind Spot

This arena depicts what other people know about an individual, yet what they do not know about themselves. This arena will include areas of self such as peculiar mannerisms, personality traits and personal discrepancies. For instance, if I see myself as a calm and balanced person, but in fact am perceived by others as being erratic and irrationally angry, then this arena will change in space according to the extent to which this peculiarity remains a mystery to me.

1.9.3 The Hidden Arena or Façade

This arena contains those aspects of self that are known to an individual but which are hidden from others – "the skeletons in the cupboard". They are private, and it is the person's wish to keep them hidden. Opinions, attitudes and biases might belong to this

window. Closeness to others determines how much is kept hidden; the greater the trust, the more likely the transparency of this window. Those personality traits that are linked to shame, embarrassment, past experiences (especially hurtful experiences) and past history that paints an individual as the sort of person they do not wish to be will belong to this window. Once again, wisdom pertaining to revelation of self is required here. This window can also be a façade. A person might believe that they are depicting a certain positive impression for example, but in fact the opposite impression may be picked up by others. Likes and dislikes of other people would fit this aspect of façade.

1.9.4   The Unknown

The unknown contains those aspects of self that are hidden from the personal consciousness. Neither the individual nor other people know these aspects. If these aspects do make themselves known, then they will most likely appear via strange, albeit unconsciously related, behaviours. As with all aspects of the unconscious self, linking such behaviours back to their source can be difficult, time-consuming and even challenging or threatening. The "unknown" can become known and reveal itself to the person in a way that allows for the realisation of potential.

1.10 Personal growth

In terms of the Johari Window, personal growth and personal development training are undertaken as an attempt to extend knowledge and understanding of self as well as others. Johns (1998) suggests that self-awareness within the professionally trained counsellor will have positive outcomes in the counselling relationship. High levels of self-awareness by the

counsellor make it easier to bracket personal emotional issues and redirect their focus to the client's needs. Counsellors can then practice with greater congruence, sensitivity and personal clarity to help bring about better outcomes for the client. Personal growth allows the counselling student to know as a result of increasing self-awareness what issues belong to them and what belongs to the client. A further and more comprehensive account of personal growth is offered in the literature review chapter.

1.11 Awareness

Johns (1998) says:

> *At the heart of all personal development work in counselling training is the belief that people can increase their capacity for self and other awareness, and so extend their knowledge and understanding. This can then be put to the service of building a core counselling relationship for the benefit of any client in which the counsellor's emotional needs are not invested and human energy is creatively harnessed to positive effect. Counsellors are then more likely to be able to work within a clear and appropriate code of ethical practice, with insight, sensitivity and sound judgement, and at the same time extend ability to work in truly non discriminatory ways with a wide spectrum of clients and colleagues.* (p. 10)

It is true that each of the participants in the personal growth group is an individual with experiences that are unique to them. However, awareness of self does seem to occur as a function of group participation even if it is at a different rate of development for each person.

The purpose of the personal growth group is the development of such an awareness of self that within the counselling relationship, it becomes easier to distinguish between issues that

belong to the client and those that belong to the counsellor. There is an attempt also to facilitate awareness of strengths and deficits in the participants so they can accept themselves as not being perfect. This can be very empowering for those taking part in these groups and this, says Egan (1998, p. 50), transfers into clinical practice in the form of reduced defensiveness on the part of the counsellor. Egan also says that genuine helpers are open and non defensive. They are aware of themselves and open to the surprise of each new client. It is this self-awareness that is achieved as a result of participating in personal growth. The development of the counsellor as a person is central to the outcomes of therapy (Corey, 2008), and Lambert and Barley (2002) claim that "empirical research strongly and consistently supports the centrality of the person of the therapist" (p. 18). Meanwhile, Norcross (2002) states that "multiple and converging sources of evidence indicate that the person of the psychotherapist is inextricably intertwined with the outcome of psychotherapy" (p. 3).

It is for these reasons that the development of the "self" of the counsellor is so important in counsellor education and training. This is achieved through the personal growth group which is the focus of the present study.

1.12 Selective self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is the term given to information shared by choice with others. Some clients will often share the most intimate aspects of their lives with counsellors as they seek to make sense of their lives and search for greater clarity and self-understanding. Good relationships demand a certain level of honesty, responsibility and involvement, and self-

disclosure is an important skill for counsellors in training to acquire. Sometimes it can be inappropriate when too much information is shared and much of it is irrelevant in nature. It is of great importance to get the balance right. This means disclosing enough information to establish rapport or a social bond, but not so much as to be threatening, offensive or boring. Egan (1998) says the research in this area is somewhat confused and that counsellor self-disclosure is an art and not a science. He suggests the following guidelines for counsellors who disclose information of themselves to clients:

- Include helper disclosure in the contract. This means advising the client that the counsellor may share personal information at times if appropriate

- Ensure disclosures are appropriate

- Do not disclose more than is necessary

- Keep disclosures selective and focussed

- Do not distract clients with counsellor ramblings

- Do not burden the client

- Measure the usefulness of the disclosure

- Remain flexible

- Treat each client separately

- Remember that not all clients will benefit from disclosure on the part of the counsellor.

Self-disclosure should be a natural part of the helping process and used in moderation. The full use of this skill requires a great deal of experience and wisdom, as it can sometimes be damaging to clients (Egan, 1998). When asked directly, however, clients often say they want counsellors to disclose themselves. This does not mean that every client in every situation wants feedback or will benefit from it. It is important therefore that in counsellor preparation and training using the small group for personal growth, that participants learn to self-disclose in a safe environment and that they receive appropriate feedback on what and how much they disclose.

Receiving feedback is how people get to know how they are seen by others. When working with clients, giving information and feedback is critical to the counselling process. Effective counsellors use attending and active listening skills to establish empathy and to understand the internal world of the client. These skills, along with effective non-verbal skills, increase mutuality and benefit for the client. Yalom (1995) suggests that when it comes to self-awareness, the more knowledge therapists have of themselves, the easier it will be to engage with their clients. Effective self-awareness is at the core of the personal growth group, which is the focus of the present study. The reason that self-awareness is acknowledged as critical for counsellors is because of the need for a therapeutic alliance to be established between counsellor and client. This alliance, say Baer, Langhoff, Linden and Zubraegel (2008), has been one of the primary areas of psychotherapy research and has been investigated in various psychotherapeutic orientations and settings. Horvarth and Symonds (1991) assert that the scientific literature suggests that the quality of the therapeutic alliance is positively related to treatment outcomes and can even lead to therapeutic changes in itself. This is certainly the case when a client-centred, facilitative

and gentle approach is adopted by the counsellor. Rogers (1961), Traux and Carkhuff (1967) and Schmidt-Traub (2003) all mantain that the therapeutic alliance is the primary treatment element in bringing about positive outcomes in therapy. Baer et al. (2008), in a study on therapeutic alliance, found that cognitive behaviour therapists managed to generate high positive scores in all aspects of the therapeutic alliance such as empathy, transparency, focusing, structuring, assurance of progress and cooperation. This would indicate that the development of a therapeutic alliance should be the focus of counsellor education and training. The ability to establish, maintain and positively utilise this therapeutic alliance is what the small personal growth group attempts to establish in those trainee counsellors who participate in it.

1.13 Development of groups

It is because the activity of personal growth referred to in this study occurs within a group setting that a discussion on groups and their development is important. Not all groups are the same. There are many types of groups, differently constituted in terms of membership, with differences in intended outcome, purpose and duration.

According to Yalom (1995), a group refers to a number of people who meet regularly, usually face to face, over time. They see themselves as a group, identify with each other as members of the group and differentiate themselves from other groups. The concept of groups and group activity has existed for centuries and includes families, tribes, religious groups and other teams of persons who identify with their particular group.

It is common to see psychotherapy and counselling practiced within a group setting and it is useful to look at how this phenomenon has developed. This section aims to provide an overview of how therapy groups originated and have developed over time. In particular, it is necessary to map the landscape of group activity in therapeutic and non-therapeutic settings so that small group activity, which is the subject of the present study, can be positioned.

Yalom and Leszcz (2005) say that Joseph Hersey Pratt, a Boston internist, should be acknowledged as the father of contemporary group therapy. While treating tuberculosis at the beginning of the twentieth century (1905), Pratt became aware of the relationship between body and mind. He designed treatment programs that included weekly group meetings of approximately 25 patients. A certain support developed amongst these patient groups that helped them to combat the depression and social isolation experienced by having this illness. In the 1920s and 1930s, many psychiatrists in Europe, including Alfred Adler (1938) used group therapy in an attempt to make treatment available to the working classes. Marsh (1935) used groups for the treatment of a range of mental illnesses including psychoses, psychoneuroses and stammering. Moreno (1941) is credited with being the first to use the term "group therapy" and is best known for his introduction of psychodrama.

With the large numbers of military psychiatric patients needing treatment following the Second World War, and the scarcity of available therapists, group approaches to therapy were accelerated. Further developments took place in the 1950s, with individual theorists using groups in clinical settings. These included the neo-Freudians Harry Stack Sullivan, Karen Horney and Carl Rogers. During this time, encounter groups continued to identify with education, social psychology and organisational development. Work groups and work

teams became important in industry and the value of social interaction was recognised by such companies as Volvo (motor manufacturers), which designed much of its workspace in the shape of a star to increase interaction between workers.

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1952) held the first T-group or Training group in 1946 in an attempt to train leaders to deal effectively with tensions among ethnic groups in the American state of Connecticut. The purpose of this was to help change the racial attitudes of the time. Lewin organised groups of ten members to discuss "back home" issues of work and these proved to be spectacularly successful. As these groups developed further, the emphasis on interpersonal exchange, personal change and the "here and now" began to take on a greater importance for the participants.

In addition to the "here and now" focus, Yalom and Leszcz (2005) suggest that T-groups made other significant contributions to therapy groups, including concepts such as feedback, observer participation, unfreezing and cognitive aids.

- **Feedback** was first applied by Lewin (1947) as an attempt to provide group participants with accurate information from their associates (e.g. superiors, co-workers) regarding their performance. Feedback then became an essential ingredient of all T-groups and encounter groups. Feedback was encouraged within group activity, offered with respect and in the here and now, and became a legitimate way for group members to learn more about themselves through the feedback they received from other members. Clarification could be requested as an attempt to increase validity and reduce perceptual distortion (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

- **Observer participation** means that leaders or group facilitators and participants must observe themselves in the group as well as engaging emotionally. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) suggest that groups will function well and be more effective if the members can experience clarity of vision with emotional experience.

- **Unfreezing** is a term that Lewin (1960) used to describe what is necessary in groups for their proper functioning. It means being prepared to examine one's assumptions about oneself, one's self-beliefs and values. Group members must be able to experience the group as a safe place for them to entertain new beliefs and experiment with the possibility of new behaviours.

- **Cognitive aids** refer to conceptual frameworks or models presented to the group in order to launch its activity. This may take the form of a mini lecture or presentation by the facilitator on a particular topic, such as self-awareness, self-esteem or anxiety. In traditional T-groups, the unconscious was considered off-limits and discussion took place in the present or the here and now.

The groups championed by Lewin were used to bring about change and were experienced as valuable and personally enhancing by many participants who engaged with them in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the 1960s, the clinically minded encounter group leaders began to endorse a model of group encounter called "personal growth". Although they still considered the approach as one of educating rather than treating, they offered a much broader and more humanistic definition of education as an activity of self-discovery and a movement towards the

development of one's true potential. These group leaders worked with normal, healthy members of society but paid great attention to their insecurities, tensions and value conflicts. Awareness and self-actualisation became important terms as the goals of these groups changed from education in the traditional sense to personal change. With this shift came one of the greatest influences on group therapy in both America and Europe: a type of group referred to by Rogers (1961) as the encounter group, which enjoyed great popularity during the 1960s and 1970s. Vast numbers of individuals took part in these groups, which were sometimes described as "therapy groups for normals" (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Although largely a thing of the past, they have been hugely influential with regard to how therapy groups are run today.

The term "encounter group" encompasses many varieties, including T-groups or training groups, sensitivity groups, marathon groups, human potential groups, experiential groups, sensory awareness groups, and personal development and personal growth groups. All of these groups have much in common. They range in size usually from eight to 20 members, are time limited and sometimes compressed into hours or days. They are large enough to allow for face to face interpersonal contact and yet small enough to allow each group member to interact within the group. They are referred to as experiential groups and the values espoused include self-disclosure and self-exploration, interpersonal honesty, challenge and heightened emotional expressiveness. There is usually an attempt at the provision of safety through a group commitment to confidentiality. The experience of group participation is what is of value and often the goals are vague and unspecified, although at least implicitly there is an emphasis on change, which is seen as a positive thing. Change can occur in behaviours, attitudes, self-esteem, and/or relationships. The

people who take part in these groups are not clients or patients but are often in search of an experience that is likely to be of benefit to them.

A "third force" in psychology that emphasised a holistic and humanistic concept of the person also emerged during this time. This was largely a reaction to Freudian analysis and the behaviourism of Watson and Skinner, says Corey (2007), and this new approach enjoyed support from such psychologists as Rollo May, Gordon Allport, Erich Fromm Abraham Maslow and James Bugenthal. There was also a chorus of support from the existential philosophers – Frederick Nietzsche, Jean Paul Sartre, Paul Tillich, Carl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. This was most likely a response to the perceived rigidity of the behaviourist and psychoanalytic models of therapy (Corey, 2008).

Group approaches continued to flourish in the 1970s, with the following types of groups enjoying great popularity:

- Gestalt groups

- Encounter groups (personal growth)

- Sensory awareness groups

- Transactional analysis groups

- Psychodrama groups

- Marathon groups

- Psychoanalytically oriented groups.

There were also serious attempts made to evaluate such groups. Perhaps the most significant attempt was carried out by Lieberman, Yalom and Miles (1973), which showed that these groups were successful and that participants rated their experience very highly. Ninety per cent of the participants considered that group participation ought to be a regular part of college curriculum (the participants were college students) and six months after the experience the overall enthusiasm remained high.

Running parallel to the development of encounter groups was the emergence (from the 1940s onwards) of "self-help" groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, and later "Over Eaters Anonymous", "Gamblers Anonymous" and "Narcotics Anonymous". These were all essentially based on the 12-step model of recovery from addiction. Other groups also emerged in an attempt to support sufferers of particular problems (e.g. postnatal depression groups and "Out and About" groups for sufferers of agoraphobia). These groups are still popular today and provide support for people in distress, giving them the opportunity to identify with fellow sufferers in a group setting.

Likewise, the encounter group as it emerged in the 1960s and 1970s continues to enjoy great popularity. However, it is important to look further at the landscape and in particular at the development of group psychotherapy in its traditional form.

One important issue was the high level of tension that existed between traditional group therapy leaders/therapists and the encounter groups' "therapy for normals" approach. The traditional mental health field was alarmed that their territory was being infiltrated by "non-medically" trained personnel and considered their patients to be at risk (Yalom & Leszcz,

2005). This acrimony is mainly historical, as today group therapy flourishes in mental health areas. Psycho-educational groups, for example, are used to effectively manage and treat "high prevalence" mental disorders, while much of what is still good from the encounter group era is incorporated in other ways.

There is no doubt that group activity and group processes can be effective, not just in therapy, but also in education. The School of Medicine at The University of Notre Dame Australia has embraced this approach with its first and second year medical students, who are required to attend small group sessions weekly so that their clinical experience can be discussed and de-briefing can take place with an experienced clinician. This is especially valuable in addressing personal feeling responses in the areas of suffering, pain, death and dying, and giving "bad news". The small group experience can bring about much personal awareness and growth for professionals who are required to work interpersonally within their professional field. Training professional counsellors is one such example where trainees are required to engage in a small group experience. Participants self-disclose and receive feedback, which helps increase self-awareness and personal growth. The participants of this type of group form the basis for the current study.

This chapter has attempted to set the scene for the present study. It has placed the personal growth group firmly within counsellor education and training and discussed the importance of the counselling relationship or therapeutic alliance as well as the "self".

The next chapter will refer to studies already undertaken in the areas of personal growth and personal development. It will also look more closely at the structure, facilitation and process of the small group activity undertaken at the UNDA.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is much data available regarding skills training in professional counsellor preparation, there is less written in the area of experiential training for counsellors. It is important however to examine what has been written regarding personal development in counsellor training.

Donati and Watts (2007) say that:

> *… despite its widely acknowledged clinical importance, it has been suggested by Hall et al. (1999), that personal development remains an obscure, poorly articulated (Hall et al., 1999, p. 99), ill defined and poorly specified area of training that suffers from a surprising scarcity of literature (Irving and Williams, 1996, p. 171). It has been proposed that this lack of clarity is connected to a tendency for the concept of personal development to be endowed with a myriad of implicit meanings and shared understandings and for related and semantically distinct terms to be used synonymously. This contributes to conceptual fuzziness, as well as practical and ethical problems for trainers and trainees".* (p. 476)

Lennie (2007) says it is surprising that a number of researchers (such as Armstrong et al., 2006; Donati & Watts, 2007 and Payne, 1999) have suggested that the personal development group is under-researched. This is especially so, she says, as this group experience is a phenomenon of importance in terms of systematic, empirical research. Lennie (2007) says there is considerable literature which suggests that developing self-awareness in the counsellor is to be applauded, while Johns (1996) says they (the trainees) are open to change through personal development. Some suggest that making personal therapy mandatory for trainee counsellors might be the best approach, as it gives insight to

the counsellor in training what it might be like to be a client (Grimmer & Tribe, 2001). There is, however, an alternate view on this as expressed by Aveline (1990), who raised questions as to the ethical nature of coercing trainees to have personal therapy to succeed in a course. Nevertheless, says Lennie (2007), an approach that includes personal therapy for trainee counsellors is standard practice in many courses. She further suggests that a possible alternative to the requirement of personal therapy might be the personal development or personal growth group. Lennie (2007) describes this type of group as "an experiential group, which is widely employed to promote self awareness in counselling trainees" (p. 116). "Generally speaking," says Payne (2004) "these groups are non directive, have closed membership, and aim to offer opportunities for reflection on interactions, and other important learning of counsellor skills and processes" (p. 511).

In relation to what these groups are trying to achieve, terms are often used interchangeably that do not always have the same meaning. One such example is the difference between personal development and personal growth.

Personal development can take place in a variety of ways and refers to the person's ability to gain an enhanced understanding of themselves and the ability to use such understanding in the counselling encounter with clients (Torres-Rivers et al., 2001). Personal development may be defined in terms of development of specific skills, aptitudes and personal qualities and "it can involve loss as well as gain" (Irving & Williams, 1999, p. 251). The personal qualities referred to above are those non-specific factors that enhance the therapeutic alliance and they include empathy, unconditional positive regard, congruence, transparency, and a genuine concern for the client and being able to help them (Rogers, 1960). A linguistic analysis of the term "developmental" suggests that it is about an

increase in complexity and includes the idea of starting something (Irving & Williams, 1999). "It can be planned and structured; goals can be defined and progress checked; criteria can be met and end points achieved" (Irving & Williams, 1999, p. 518). Pelling et al. (2006) say that the significant professional bodies that regulate the profession of counselling and training standards within courses (see for example American Counselling Association, 1995; Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programmes [CACREP], 2001; Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia [PACFA], 2006; Australian Counselling Association, 2002) underline the necessity of student counsellors undertaking their own personal work. They do not however, according to Armstrong et al. (2006), say specifically how, when and where this personal work should take place. Irving and Williams (1999) underline the need to identify those facets of personal development that are essential for the development of a safe and competent counsellor regardless of the theoretical orientation they come from (such as the Psychodynamic, Humanistic, Existential or Behavioural approaches). They classify different aspects of personal development as follows:

1. *Those which are essential and impinge directly on work with any client e.g being fully aware of one's sexuality.*

2. *Those which might be useful with certain clients or clients groups e.g ethnic sensitivity*

3. *Those which are essential to the psychological health of the counsellor e.g learning to like oneself and of only indirect importance to the client.*

4. *Those which are the pleasure and indulgence of the counsellor.* (p. 523)

Personal growth, as defined by Wilkins (1997), refers to a process of becoming a certain kind of person and a process of attending to counsellors' needs in such a way as to increase their ability to be with their clients in a safe and effective way. It is about dealing with counsellors' blind spots and resistance and increasing counsellors' resources so that they have the energy and enthusiasm to effectively attend to work demands. Wilkins (1997) suggests it includes "an obligation to address personal material which may inhibit our clients' therapy and also an obligation to care for the self of the therapist" (p. 10).

A linguistic analysis of the term "growth" suggests it has something to do with an increase in quantity and includes "making something more than it was" (Irving & Williams, 1999, p. 518). The concept of personal growth, say Irving and Williams (1999), is used to talk about changes that are more permanent and usually lead in a positive direction. Counsellors can not plan processes of growth; they can only identify these processes when it is apparent that a person's experience has led to growth (Irving & Williams, 1999). Irving and Williams (1999) further suggest that personal development needs can be the focus of training in the areas of skills training, aptitudes and personal qualities and that personal growth is the outcome for trainees. According to Hensley, Smith and Thompson (2003), research results are consistent in finding a positive relationship between counsellor competence and professional and personal development.

It is clear that these aspects of personal development are of importance in working with clients and are therefore relevant to counsellor training programs. They should, say Pelling et al. (2006), come under the purview of counsellor educators. Part of the rationale of the present study is to attend to the personal response of a sample of counsellor trainees following a personal growth experience as part of their training program and the

significance and meaning it had for them. Many authors support the idea of personal development as a necessity for the development of professional competence (Andolfi, 1996; Aponte & Winter, 1987; Irving & Williams, 1999; Mearns, 1997; Satir, 1978 ; Torres-Revoira, 2001). Wilkins (1997) says that counsellors "are ethically bound to address their own growth, in order to be able to facilitate the growth of their clients" (p. 2). Similarly, Aponte and Winter (2000) state that counsellors require personal as well as technical training to develop competencies. They argue that the student counsellor has two tasks:

> *First, to seek to define self and resolve personal issues that affect one's work; and second to learn to recognise and contend with one's flaws, since there is no possibility … that a person can ever achieve full resolution of current or past afflictions.* (p. 137)

The major professional counselling associations in the United States (American Counselling Association), the United Kingdom (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy), Canada (Canadian Professional Counsellors Association), Australia (Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia) and New Zealand (New Zealand Association of Counsellors) not only support and encourage personal growth in the training of counsellors but also prescribe that personal growth be a part of the curriculum used to prepare counsellors for entry into the profession.

Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia [PACFA] training standards (2006) state:

> *Members must have completed a component of self awareness as part of their training. This must be a minimum of 20 hours duration and may include group or individual therapy.*
>
> *An understanding of how one may use one's self in the therapeutic relationship should be integrated within the training programme ... in addition, students should be encouraged to have experiences as a client in a modality compatible to the one in which they are training.* (Section 2.5.1)

Mearns (1997) suggests that personal growth groups could parallel the practical training for student counsellors, while Payne (1999) argues that these groups are confidential and best kept separate from assessment and academic procedures. According to Wilkins (1997), "the most successful students tend to be those who take constructive steps to address their personal issues and who have most practice with real clients" (p. 3).

Many counselling courses encourage trainees to undertake personal development essentially on their own, without a direct relationship with other course members (Johns, 1998). Such trainees may have personal mentors, tutors and/or experienced counsellors to facilitate their personal awareness, but this is different to reciprocal work with contemporaries through structured and unstructured activities in a small group setting, not least because of the culture created within the group itself.

Activities of an individual nature outside of the small group may include personal counselling outside of the course, supervision by a senior counsellor where personal issues are discussed, journal keeping as a record of the student's learning journey (Progroff,

1975), personal reflection, and also feedback for oneself on individual responses to new learning. All of these activities may be helpful in increasing self-awareness in the trainee counsellor but may lack the challenge that occurs in a small group setting. The support of the group is also an important aspect of developing self-awareness and the dynamic that is created within a group is quite different from any individual work that the trainee might undergo (Yalom, 1995).

According to Johns (1998), effective counsellor training should extend individual horizons, facilitate a broad understanding of others and help to increase acceptance of the many human variations that exist. This will have the effect of providing a trigger for many personal issues of which the trainee counsellor will become aware. These personal areas may include unresolved issues with authority, intimacy and family of origin issues. Participants may feel challenged regarding personal attitudes and beliefs, or by issues pertaining to religious frameworks, lifestyle and sexuality.

It may sometimes be the case that increased personal awareness has a confronting effect on individuals in the group; for example, a middle-aged woman experiencing a new and exciting sense of identity and confidence may sharply contrast this with a stable but now apparently boring and humdrum marriage. Group facilitators need to be sensitive to these issues and respect the feelings, and at times, confusion being experienced by group participants. This is critical to the success of these groups. Other experiences that these trainees may encounter include feeling inadequate, angry and frightened as they realise personal issues that increase their level of vulnerability but also their self-knowledge or self-awareness.

Another approach to personal development is the use of structured activities. These include activities in dyads and triads where the focus is on thinking and feelings. These activities can involve role play on real issues or simulated counselling sessions. There is often a greater sense of intimacy in these settings, but also one of safety, which some participants may not experience in larger groups or indeed in their personal lives.

2.1   Personal growth in groups

Counselling courses vary enormously from each other and there does not appear to be a consistency in terms of how counsellors are trained. There is some common ground in that participants are likely to have experience in a large group that constitutes the whole teaching community, smaller structured groups for skills training and practice, and in certain instances, small structured or unstructured groups specifically described as personal growth groups (Johns, 1998).

Much has been written to describe how groups operate. The different theoretical models, individual behaviour in groups and group facilitator styles are all described in detail in Corey and Corey (2002), Johnson and Johnson (1997), Houston (1990) and Vernelle (1994). A more detailed account of the development of groups was described in Chapter 1.

One of the reasons that groups are important in counsellor training is that they facilitate a different kind of learning. A central aim of training counsellors is to increase self-knowledge and self-acceptance. This is achieved in the small group context through self-disclosure and feedback from other participants in the group.

Connor (1994) contends that interpersonal as well as intrapersonal explorations are necessary to make unconscious and subconscious assumptions conscious. Group experience provides subtle contexts for us to practice and deepen our capacity to communicate the core conditions as described by Rogers (1961); the conditions of genuineness, acceptance and transparency. Being in such a group allows for learning about our ability to respond cognitively, affectively and behaviourally to others who are communicating with us on the same dimension. Personal growth is now widely used and accepted as a valid method of training counsellors in the areas of personal and interpersonal exploration in universities in the British Isles. These include the National University of Ireland and its constituent colleges in Dublin, Cork and Galway, as well as the University of Cardiff, the University of Bristol and the University of Manchester.

The fact that universities undertaking professional training for counsellors are increasingly engaging their students in personal growth marks an acknowledgement by them of the significance of the counsellor as a person and also the ethical and professional importance of self-knowledge. The aim is to enhance the therapeutic relationship or therapeutic alliance for each client as they encounter the counselling process. It is an attempt to safeguard the client by ensuring the self-awareness of the counsellor as they are being prepared for professional practice with a vulnerable group of people who are often in great distress.

Corey (2008) says that:

> *Opportunities for self-exploration within training sessions can be instrumental in helping trainees assess their motivations for pursuing the professional path of counselling. An examination of personal values, needs, attitudes and experiences can sometimes illuminate what counsellors are getting from helping others. Self exploration can help trainee counsellors avoid the pitfalls of continually giving to others yet finding little personal satisfaction from their efforts. An aspiring practicing professional can benefit personally from self awareness.* (p. 19)

As the training group begins its life, it is important that the facilitator ensures that all members are willing participants; that is to say, that the members of the group wish to be there and do not feel in any way pressured to take part. The purpose of the group and rationale must be explained to the participants and great care taken to create a safe place for those taking part. It is the facilitator's responsibility to clarify group and individual behaviours that are acceptable and to ensure that principles of interpersonal respect are adhered to. All members must agree to engage in the process and to participate. All members must use "I" statements and take responsibility and ownership for what is said. They must likewise agree to offer feedback to other members, and through this process all will develop a deeper understanding of themselves and each other. The process of communicating is interpersonal.

According to Johns (1998), there is general agreement that these groups are not therapy groups, although she suggests that this is easier to state in theory than to manage in practice. Some issues will raise certain feelings of distress that should be clarified within the group but then taken outside the group for personal counselling if necessary. As each of

the facilitators is a qualified therapist, they will refer appropriately to a counsellor/psychotherapist if this is required.

Individuals within these groups will have different needs and some will share more of themselves than others. There will often be resistance to self-disclosure and it is not always easy to establish a balance whereby each participant engages in self-disclosure. It is the responsibility of the facilitator, says Johns (1998), to ensure that this type of group is not a place for intensive personality restructuring or deep therapeutic work for, or with, any one individual. If this does occur it can be at the expense of other members. This group experience is a key method in professional counsellor preparation so that sharing and processing of personal learning and development can occur. The process requires sensitive management so that participants do not get hurt or are left in an unsafe place emotionally.

There are also other important issues in relation to personal growth groups. These include confidentiality, group membership and continuity, facilitation of the group, group structure, assessment, and the support and challenge balance in group activity.

2.2   Group membership and continuity

Most counselling small groups have their membership limited to multiples of 12 or 13 (Johnson & Johnson, 1997). This is the optimum size of a personal growth group. The limited size of the group allows for all members to participate without feeling that they are taking up too much time. Group facilitation is also made easier and more manageable if the size of the group is limited.

One of the issues is whether or not membership of each group ought to remain constant throughout the course. There is no guidance from the literature here, although it seems to be generally agreed in practice that the membership of the group should remain constant over the duration of the course. This is to ensure that no new members join the group, which naturally develops a unique history from its first meeting. New members would have no access to issues raised in previous sessions and perhaps worked on by other members of the group. This may be a cause of resentment for new group members who may feel as if they are intruders. It is also likely that when the group establishes trust and begins to work well that issues of a deeper nature will emerge (Johns, 1998). As far as the facilitator goes, it is likely to be beneficial if the group members experience more than one model of facilitation throughout their course. A decision is therefore often made that groups have continuity of membership for one year only. The following year a new group is constituted and a different facilitator allocated to year two. This has the advantage of reducing the possibility of enmeshment and interdependence within the group. However, group participants need to be advised that these changes will occur so they are prepared in advance for the new group membership and can engage in appropriate closure of the first group.

Another important issue is how to best allocate group membership in the first place. Group membership may be decided through allocation by course personnel on predetermined criteria; for example, gender, age, culture or sexual orientation. It may also be a random selection; for example, on an alphabetical basis or even more simply based on the available tutorial times and/or a good fit to participants' availability given other commitments such as family and work. There is no "correct" manner of allocating members, says Johns (1998), and typically membership is allocated randomly, as in alphabetical order.

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2.3 Group facilitation

It is crucial that experienced group leaders facilitate small groups in personal development training for counsellors. This is because of the sensitivity of the subject matter and also the level of risk taking that occurs as a result of self-disclosure.

The facilitator must be aware of their role within the group. This should be explicitly stated at the commencement of the group to ensure clarity of understanding and reduce anxiety that may be present in some participants. It is essential that the facilitator invite discussion regarding expectations and concerns that participants might have. Much discussion of this nature is usually required at the forming stage of the group.

Corey and Corey (2002) suggest that effective group facilitators require the following personal and professional characteristics:

- Courage to express oneself; challenge as well as support others and to be real

- Willingness to model such group norms as openness, acceptance of others, and desirability of taking risks

- Presence, which involves being touched by the discomfort and distress of group members as they share intimate details of their lives

- Goodwill and caring, so that a sincere interest in the welfare of others is evident

- Confidence in oneself

- Willingness to seek new experiences

- Self-awareness

- Sense of humour

- Personal dedication and commitment.

Johns (1998) further states that the role of the facilitator is to:

- create a safe learning space

- enable participants to take some risks

- be alert to destructive group processes (e.g. scapegoating, triangulation and other disrespectful behaviours)

- model appropriate skills of an interpersonal nature

- be clear about what the purpose of the group is. It is personal development not therapy, self-awareness not self-indulgent egocentrism

- create a group culture that is respectful of all members, optimises member involvement and establishes trust within the group.

2.4 Group structure

While many group facilitators are committed to the value of the unstructured group, others take the view that the facilitator will always have an agenda that is either implicit or explicit. Johns (1998) says that many facilitators prefer the unstructured group because it is only without structure that conscious and unconscious needs and significant issues can be addressed. The particular theoretical orientation of the facilitator is likely to influence the decision as to how much structure there is. However, Vernelle (1994) emphasises that structure produces more cohesive groups. The structure referred to includes exercises at the beginning of a session or the declaration of a specific topic for discussion; for example, vulnerability and fear. Vernelle (1994) also says that groups with structure produce more engaged participants, greater self-defined learning, a more positive view of facilitators and a higher level of interpersonal trust.

These activities ensure that all group members are included in the process. For example, each participant may be invited to make an "I" statement, or perhaps to include a feeling word at the beginning or close of each group session. It is probably more likely that the facilitator will lose control of the group if only an unstructured approach is taken (Vernelle, 1994). It is the experience of the author that a mixture of structured and unstructured activities that allows time for reflection and feedback by participants can work very well.

2.5 Assessment

This is an area of much debate in the professional training of counsellors. Johns (1998) believes that facilitators of small personal growth groups should not be core staff members of the university department and should not be involved in any other course activities. She argues that performance in these groups ought not to be assessed in traditional ways so that participants will feel freer to bring difficult issues to the group.

Those who hold this view see the outside facilitator as less partisan, and less oppressive to group members. There is, however, an important issue of competence in the area of interpersonal skills, and although conflicts with roles, authority and judgement may exist, there is also, for students, the inevitability of assessment and evaluation. This is especially true where standards for professional counsellors are in focus. However, assessment does not need to be threatening for the student. If self-assessment, peer assessment and facilitator assessment are undertaken, and journal keeping is a requirement, then assessment will usually be seen in the light of learning and personal growth and is likely to be embraced rather than feared. It is these principles of assessment that are advocated in the School of Arts and Sciences at The University of Notre Dame Australia, the locus of this study.

2.6 Support and challenge

Vernelle (1994) says that in tapping the potential for learning in personal development groups, the central and most valuable relationship is that between support and challenge. As

with counselling, if adequate support and empathic acceptance are present, challenge can be creative and effective in helping people change and grow.

It is certainly the case that participation in a small group will expose the members to the challenge of self-exploration. These groups need to be managed in such a way that they are safe places for beginning counsellors to be. Therefore, there needs to be a balance between challenge and support. The philosophical position of the course and the small group experience within the course will dictate the culture of the group experience for the participants. There is little doubt that anxiety and uncertainty can create fertile learning contexts, but it is also important that trust, warmth and empathy are encouraged and modelled by the facilitator at the same time. The philosophical and theoretical position adopted in the School of Arts and Sciences at The University of Notre Dame Australia, whose graduates are the participants in this study, is a person-centred one. This approach is supportive of a gentle and facilitative style as described by Rogers (1961). The principles that Rogers espoused are as follows:

- Unconditional positive regard

- Advanced and accurate empathy

- Congruence or appropriateness

- Transparency.

He asserts that if these conditions are present in the facilitator then change is inevitable and that it is possible to challenge a person without being offensive.

Egan (1998) states that challenging requires wisdom. He outlines the following principles that offer guidelines as to how challenging should take place:

- Keep the goals of challenging in mind. That means entering a challenge should be offered in a caring and genuine manner. It should be designed to help participants gain awareness of issues regarding themselves.

- Be open to challenge oneself.

- Try to empathise with the participant so that the challenge can be more effective.

- Be tentative but non apologetic as tentative interpretations are seen more positively than absolute interpretations.

- Challenge unused strengths rather than weaknesses.

- Respect participant's values.

- Challenge honestly and caringly with no power games, put-downs tricks or games. (p.189)

The clear suggestion here is that the facilitator should challenge in a supportive manner, providing a model for the participants who are, after all, counsellors in training.

Some groups with a strong psychodynamic orientation can have a distant and interpretative facilitator who does not support or prize the endeavours of a group member. Conversely, person-centred groups that are based on Gestalt, transactional analytic or psychodramatic

approaches can be supporting of the group member while they embrace the challenge presented to them by the group process.

In this climate of support and challenge, group participation can contribute to an increase in self-awareness, self-responsibility and self-esteem. Small groups have great potential as a forum for learning about oneself, but this type of learning may not suit everyone. A study of group work in counselling training (Irving & Williams, 1995) compared responses to and benefits from group participation with learning styles as described by Honey and Mumford (1986). These learning styles included:

- Activists, who engross themselves in the here and now and enjoy games and team work

- Reflectors, who stand back from events and think before acting

- Theorists, who learn best when situations have purpose and they can link what they are doing to something else

- Pragmatists, who concentrate on practical issues and like to see a link between what they learn and how they can use it.

Those with a learning style who preferred to *do* (activists and pragmatists) were more positive about the work than those preferring to *think* (theorists and reflectors). All believed they had gained in personal development but described their gains differently. Activists emphasised skills learning, while reflectors noticed process as well as outcomes. All but the pragmatists experienced vulnerability.

This shows that not all groups will or can work in the same way and not all group participants will embrace the process similarly due to individual differences. What is clear though is that support, and a climate of trust and respect, are always vital in the pursuit of personal development in counsellor training. This is especially true when all of the many dynamics that occur within the small group framework are taken into account.

There are positive as well as negative aspects concerning issues of personal growth as part of counsellor education. It is positive that participants of these groups can engage in discussion of personal issues in a safe and well-structured environment. This reduces the prospect of burn-out and leads to therapeutic benefits for group members. It also ensures that empathic understanding by the counsellor for the client remains high (Aponte & Winter, 2000).

However, there are those who suggest that personal growth in a training or educational setting is risky and that negative outcomes may occur. Bernard and Goodyear (1997) say that some student counsellors may become so absorbed in their personal issues that they lose objectivity with their clients. However, the risks that may exist can be managed through good planning, good personal development training and adequate support systems being put in place (Williams & Irving, 1996).

According to Hensley, Smith and Thompson (2003), research results are consistent in finding a positive relationship between counsellor competence and professional and personal development. However, Donati and Watts (2000) suggest that further research is required to make any significant conclusions about the relationship between personal development in training and counsellor effectiveness thereafter:

In order to create the best possible opportunities for counsellors to undertake personal development in training, counselling and counselling psychology trainers should try to gain more intimate and realistic understanding of the way different kinds of personal development work are accurately experienced by individual trainees. (p. 16)

This is precisely the focus of the present study.

The present study examines the meaning and personal significance of the small group experience for participants who have recently (within two years) graduated as counsellors from the School of Arts and Sciences at The University of Notre Dame Australia. It is because this study intended to discover the meaning of the experience of being participants in a personal growth group that a phenomenological approach was taken when choosing the methodology to answer the research question.

2.7   Phenomenology

This discussion of phenomenology is to provide a context and philosophical background for the chosen methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Smith (2008) concludes that phenomenology is the study of consciousness as personally experienced from the first-person perspective. It is based on a philosophy initiated by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century, although in the philosophical tradition it appears to have been in existence as a concept much earlier than that. Originally, according to Smith (2003), "phenomenology" meant the theory of appearances fundamental to empirical knowledge and was first introduced by Johann Heinrich Lambert. Immanuel Kant used the term, as did Franz Brentano (1995), to characterise what they termed descriptive

psychology. It was from here that Edmund Husserl adopted the term to describe his new science of consciousness.

In its basic meaning, phenomenology was understood as the study of phenomena. This means the study of appearances in an immediate manner rather than empirical certainty, and this distinction appears to have launched philosophers into a different form of discussion.

As the discipline of psychology emerged in the nineteenth century, the concept of phenomena took on a different meaning. Brentano (1995) argues that mental phenomena are acts of consciousness and are directed towards some object, and that only mental phenomena are so directed. He uses the term phenomenology for descriptive psychology, but it was Husserl who developed the concept further and phenomenology is now firmly linked to him in the same way that ontology or metaphysics are linked to Aristotle and epistemology to Renee Descartes.

Smith (2008) suggests that classical phenomenologists practiced three distinguishable methods:

1. Pure description of lived experience or a description of a type of experience, as described by Husserl (1913) and Merleau-Ponty (1996).

2. The experimental paradigm of cognitive neuroscience where an attempt was made to verify or refute aspects of experience; for example where the brain showed electrochemical activity in an area thought to be linked to emotional or

motor control. This approach to phenomenology took the position that conscious experience is grounded in neural activity.

3. The interpretation of a type of experience within a certain context. It is this interpretation that Heidegger (1962) calls hermeneutics, and which Smith (2003) refers to as the art of interpretation in context, especially within a linguistic and social context.

Smith (2008) goes further to assert that:

> *Awareness of experience is a defining trait of conscious experience, the trait that gives experience a first-person, lived character. It is that lived character of experience that allows an insider perspective on the object of study, namely experience.* (p. 35)

This "insider perspective" is characteristic of the methodology of phenomenology. Hermeneutical phenomenology attempts to understand the interpreted structures of experience and how we understand others and ourselves in the world around us. In the late nineteenth century, as phenomenology was being developed as a philosophy, so too was psychology. It was then that psychology began to seek secure knowledge within the most prestigious paradigm of that time, namely the experimental laboratory. Psychology has not changed much since then as a discipline and is very conservative in its interpretation of science. Smith (2008) suggests that clinicians and researchers in psychology who depart from conventional criteria that are fixed within the scientific method do so at considerable risk to their credibility. It is for this reason that it is important to detail what phenomenology is, both as a philosophy and also as a legitimate method of scientific inquiry.

Phenomenological psychological research seeks to clarify the circumstances of people's lives as they experience them each day. It is not interested in reducing phenomena to a number of identifiable variables and controlling the context within which the phenomenon is studied. This is not to suggest that a phenomenological approach is without rigour, or that it does not remain true and faithful to the phenomenon being studied. Meaning is paramount, and an attempt is made to capture as closely as possible the way that the phenomenon is experienced in context.

Researchers using a phenomenological approach search for the central invariant structure or essence, or the central underlying meaning of the experience of the phenomenon under investigation. A key notion of phenomenology is that of intentionality. Giorgi (2003) defines this as the essence of consciousness and suggests that consciousness is always directed at some world or other. This can be the real world or an imagined world. Strictly speaking, intentionality means that all acts of consciousness are directed to objects that transcend the acts themselves; for example, loving is directed towards a loved object. It is the object itself that is grasped in consciousness rather than a representation of it.

A question arises as to how these aspects of consciousness or experiences are to be communicated. Husserl's answer is by "careful description", although he acknowledges that this could be difficult to do. Husserl (2001) suggests that unexpected biases lurk everywhere, especially in everyday life. He introduces certain attitudinal modifications and although they are not guarantees, they are an attempt to obtain the most precise data from descriptions of experiences.

One of these attitudinal shifts is called "epoche" or **bracketing**. Husserl is aware that a common error in description is the subsuming of later experiences under the rubrics of experiences that have gone before. In order to avoid sweeping generalisations and to be fresh and open to the concrete lived experiences being described, he suggests that one brackets knowledge of the phenomenon being researched that has come from other instances or indirect sources. This does not mean to be unconscious to these other sources but rather to put them aside so that different nuances or dimensions of the phenomena being described can be grasped. A more comprehensive discussion on the "epoche" or "bracketing" is offered as part of the description of the specific methodology used in the present study, namely Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (see section 3.7).

Another attitudinal modification suggested by Husserl is phenomenological reduction. The methodology of reduction refers to the analysis of specific statements and themes and a search for all possible meanings (Creswell, 1998). All prejudgements are set aside and, relying on imagination and intuition, and using universal structures, a picture is obtained of the experience. Husserl (2001) describes this reduction as empirical/transcendental phenomenology, while others, like Creswell (1998), Giorgi (2003) and Moustakas (1994) refer to a psychological phenomenology. Polkinghorne (1988) suggests there is general consensus as to how one should proceed:

> *These methods, based on phenomenological principles, function as general guidelines or outlines, and researchers are expected to develop plans of study especially suited to understanding the particular experiential phenomenon that is the object of their study.* (p. 44)

The phenomenological approach to inquiry reflects a return to the traditional tasks of philosophy that existed prior to the emergence of "scientism" at the end of the nineteenth century, when philosophy became limited to exploring the world by empirical means. Phenomenology is also a philosophy without presuppositions, where these are suspended in favour of the descriptions given by the individual. It is also concerned with the intentionality of consciousness and reality is not divided into subjects and objects. The reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual. The central tenets of this thinking are:

> *to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences of structures of the experience.* (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13)

Creswell (1998) suggests that a phenomenological study may be challenging, as:

- the researcher requires a solid grounding in the philosophical precepts of phenomenology

- the participants of the study need to be carefully chosen

- bracketing personal experiences by the researcher may be difficult

- the researcher needs to decide how his or her personal experiences will be introduced into the study.

Husserl (2001) aimed to develop a science of pure abstract thought that arrives at truth about the atemporal essences of things. Although human consciousness remains important

as the unique source of our knowledge, Husserl (2001) argues that our intention must always be to move beyond the limitations of ordinary experience so that we can better understand the reality that underlies it. It is this version of phenomenology that most influenced the philosophy of Heidegger (1962) and which became a legitimate area of study in trying to grasp a greater understanding of the human condition. The researcher conducting the present study holds degrees in Philosophy as well as Psychology, and this background in psychology in particular is seen by Smith (2008) as a desirable one to undertake phenomenological research and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in particular. There is little doubt that there is a significant move towards qualitative research in the social sciences (Neuman, 2003). In many cases, this type of research involves lengthy interviews where participants disclose very personal details. A phenomenological design seeks to ascertain an "insider" perspective from research participants where the information being sought is very personal indeed (Smith, 2008). Bordeau (2000) suggests great similarities between the semi-structured interviews applied in qualitative research and the therapeutic relationship between counsellor/psychologist and client. This is an important point and is referred to by Vesper and Brock (1991) and Wolcott (1994), who suggest that both therapy and qualitative research seek to empower the people who choose to participate. It is difficult then to assume that a power differential will always be damaging to the participants. Bordeau (2000) also finds structural similarities between qualitative research and therapy:

Both involve intensive interviewing where one person (the client/participant) divulges a very large amount of personal information to a person whose responsibility is to listen and ask probing questions. (p. 2)

2.8   Ethical considerations

Prior to any collection of data, approval was sought from The University of Notre Dame Research Ethics Committee. This was to ensure that the proposed research complied with established guidelines such as those set out in the NHRMC statement on research on human subjects and supplementary notice 1998 (University of Western Australia, 1998). The application to seek ethics approval specifically referred to the prior student status of the participants and the previous relationship the researcher had with them. Issues outlined in this application included possible identification of participants (and a statement as to how they would be de-identified), confidentiality and storage of sensitive material on completion of the research project. Seeking ethical approval was a further attempt to safeguard the rights and dignity of each participant. Full ethical approval was granted to carry out this research in December 2006.

The intention of the researcher was to act with the highest regard for the sensitivities and interests of all subjects in this study. To this end, an application was made to the ethics committee of The University of Notre Dame Australia for approval to carry out the study. Data was not gathered until this approval was granted.

The ethical considerations associated with this research, and included in the research proposal, were identified as follows:

- Dual relationships

- Duty of care

- Informed consent

- Confidentiality

- Protection and storage of data.

2.9   Dual relationships

The researcher occupied a dual role, in that he had been a teacher of the participants and the coordinator of the programs from which they graduated. However, he did not have any involvement in their personal growth training and had not been in contact with any of them for a two-year period since their graduation. This lapse of time diminishes significantly the ethical issue that could exist with the researcher having a prior relationship with the participants in the study. Nevertheless, this is a significant issue within the present study and requires specific attention.

Much has been written and debated regarding "dual relationships", especially when it comes to relationships between counsellor and client (Brownlee, 1996; Fine, 1992; Herlihy & Corey, 1996; Pearson & Piazza, 1997; Schank & Skovolt, 1997; Vesper & Brock, 1991; Walcott, 1994; Zur, 2000), and although there appears to be a universal appeal for caution and great care, it is by no means the case that the literature supports a total ban on dual relationships of a non-sexual nature. Pope and Vasquez (1998) suggest that the power

differential has the potential to do harm through exploitation of the client. A similar case could be stated regarding the power differential between researcher and research participant. The term "dual relationship" has been used interchangeably with terms such as "exploitation", "abuse", "damage" and "sexual abuse" (Zur, 2000). Zur (2000) also cautions the researcher to remember that dual relationships, or any relationship with a power differential, are potentially exploitive. He includes parent-child, teacher-student and doctor-patient relationships as examples. It is also possible to include employer-employee as well as researcher-research participant relationships in qualitative designs. Friedman (2000) is very forthright in asserting that although the waters can be muddy and will require careful navigation, "I do not believe that dual relationships are inherently harmful … and my primary responsibility is to respect the dignity and promote the welfare of those I serve" (p. 6).

It was imperative that the rationale for this research be explained thoroughly to the participants prior to commencement and that any and all concerns were addressed (Appendix III). No participant was asked to enter into this study if they expressed even the slightest reservation, concern or apprehension. The researcher was bound by the Code of Ethics of the Australian Psychological Society, of which he is a member. However, as Babbie (1983) accurately points out:

> *All of us consider ourselves to be ethical; not perfect perhaps, but more ethical than most of humanity … unfortunately, one of the problems with social science is that ethical considerations are subjective.* (p. 43)

While the interviews conducted with participants were not counselling interviews, they were nonetheless bound by the same ethical principles as a professional counselling interview would be. According to Corey (2008), these ethical principles are:

- accepting responsibility for doing what is good (Beneficence)

- a commitment by the researcher to do no harm (Non-maleficence)

- an acceptance that the subjects have a right to self-determination (Autonomy)

- equal and fair treatment of all participants, regardless of race, religion, culture, sex, disability, lifestyle orientation, or socio-economic status (Justice)

- being true to ourselves and honest in our attempts not to deceive or exploit participants (Fidelity).

These are similar to the principles described by Meara and Schmidt (1991), who also state that a commitment to justice means that researchers do not use the study to benefit themselves to the detriment of others, resulting in an imbalance of responsibility for the participant and reward for the researcher.

Dual relationships are those that occur when a person enters a second professional role or relationship with a client or group of clients that may cause conflict. In many cases, the ethical guidelines are very clear; for example, with regard to sexual relationships with clients or between students and teachers. These relationships are unethical, unprofessional and illegal.

However, non-sexual dual relationships are often complex, and according to Corey (2008) there are few simple and absolute answers to neatly resolve the issues raised. There are guidelines through codes of ethics, which are written to help clients and therapists alike. For example, the revised American Psychological Association (2003) code of ethics pertaining to dual relationships suggests that a therapist should refrain from entering a dual relationship if this relationship could reasonably be expected to impair the therapist's objectivity, competence or effectiveness in performing his or her functions as a psychologist, or otherwise risks exploitation to the person or persons with whom the professional relationship exists.

However, it is often the case that a dual relationship may be of benefit to a client or a group of clients and it is a mistake to assume that the relationship will always lead to harm and exploitation (Corey, 2008). Lazarus and Zur (2002) suggest:

> *Dual relationships can be beneficial to clients if they are implemented thoughtfully and with integrity … it is a mistake to conclude that all nonsexual dual relationships are always unethical and always lead to harm. The current focus of ethics codes is to remain alert to the possibilities of damaging exploitation and harm to clients (and research participants by extension) rather than a universal prohibition of all dual and multiple relationships.* (p. 47)

Pearson and Piazza (1997) classify dual relationships into five categories as follows:

> 1. *Circumstantial multiple roles. These occur by coincidence for example meeting a participant in a shopping precinct.*
>
> 2. *Structured multiple professional roles. These are acceptable if the nature of all the relationships is professional.*

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3. *Shifts in professional roles such as a teacher changing into a counselling role.*

4. *Personal and professional role conflicts. These include sexual or romantic or social relationships for example engaging in a shared pastime.*

5. *The predatory professional who exploits the professional relationship to meet their own needs at the expense of the client/participant.* (p. 2)

They further assert that "multiple professional roles such as advisor-instructor, supervisor-mentor, counsellor-advocate and other roles too (to include researcher-participants) enhance our possibilities for effectiveness as counsellors and educators" (Pearson & Piazza, 1997, p. 2).

Gottlieb (1993) devised a decision-making model regarding "dual relationships", and Bourdeau (2000) is of the opinion that this model is an appropriate one for qualitative researchers to adopt. The model is organised along three dimensions, each having three levels of intensity. The dimensions are:

- Power

- Duration of relationship

- Clarity of termination.

Power can be defined as the ability or capacity to exercise personal control. In so far as it relates to this study, it implies that there is personal autonomy and that a feeling of empowerment is supported and encouraged.

Power varies from low to mid-range to high. The levels of power are dependent on the amount of vulnerability required of the participant and the amount of influence maintained by the researcher. A relationship that is low in power might be one where the research participants are considered to be more like peers; whereas in a high power relationship one member (the researcher) has much more influence over a participant who is vulnerable. The power status deficit in the present study was low.

The duration of the relationship as described by Gottlieb (1993) varies from brief to intermediate to long. The advance telephone contact to announce the project took less than ten minutes with the participants in the present study. The interviews took 60–70 minutes each and participants were interviewed only once. The duration of relationship for the research was brief, but because the researcher was acquainted with the participants previously (two years prior to the commencement of the study) it might be argued that the duration was at most intermediate. It cannot be argued though that these were long-term relationships.

The clarity of termination ranges from specific to indefinite. In the present study, participants were in no doubt that the relationship was for the purpose of gathering data on the small experiential group and on completion of the interview the relationship was ended. Therefore the clarity of the termination of the relationship was specific. It is also important to remember that the relationship was a professional one, as discussed earlier against the background to the categories described by Pearson and Piazza (1997). When making decisions using these models, a researcher is obligated to interpret the relationship in terms of the dimensions outlined above. The more the relationship falls into the intense realms of

high power differential, long duration and indefinite termination, the greater the potential for harm, and on assessment a relationship might be ruled out.

The relationship entered into between lecturer and former students to carry out this study may have significant potential for benefit and minimal potential for harm. This is especially the case if the resulting data can be used to inform the counselling profession as to how training might be conducted in the future, or at the very least contribute to the discussion on personal growth in counsellor training. It is also ethically less problematic in the case of this present study, as all participants had completed their studies and had left the University at least two years previously. The benefit to the participants was that they were given an opportunity to reflect on their personal development training while a counselling student and the transcripts of the interviews reflects this. All participants in the present study were employed a counsellors. Five were in full-time employment and three were part time at 0.5.

The graduates were exposed to such an experience over the duration of their training that they had confidence in their ability to express themselves honestly and openly. They were all moderately assertive and had the emotional maturity to express themselves clearly. This meant that they had no fear of saying what the experience was like for them, good or otherwise, and this is reflected in the transcribed interviews. Participants included negative as well as positive experiences as a true reflection of their small group experience. On balance therefore, the researcher, while acknowledging the potential for bias and the "halo" effect that might have taken place, believes that sufficient safeguards were put in place to maximise objectivity. Punch (2000) says:

The point to stress … is that the researcher needs to be aware of and sensitive to the ethical issues involved in any proposed research and to think about them during the planning stage of the project. (p. 282).

The researcher in the present study believes that this was case here.

2.10 Informed consent

Related to the empowerment of the study participants is the issue of informed consent. Each participant was fully informed in writing with regard to the research process and the clear rationale behind the study (Appendix III). The requirements to complete the survey questionnaire as well as the semi-standardised interview were clearly explained. Participants in this study were accorded the respect that goes with asking questions and seeking clarification on any issue not clearly understood. Participants were informed of their right not to take part in this research unless they freely chose to do so, and of their right to withdraw or discontinue at any time for whatever reason or indeed for none. They were reassured that no negative consequences would be associated with non-participation or withdrawal from the study. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (Appendix IV).

2.11 Confidentiality

This research respected the individual's rights of privacy and confidentiality at all times. The participants were assured of the following:

- All information would be treated confidentially.

- No personal information would be made available to a third party for any reason.

- Personal or demographic data would be separated from interview responses to further protect confidentiality and prevent identification of any subject.

- Each participant would be asked to choose an alternate name to protect his or her identity.

- All recorded material, written notes and transcripts would be stored in a locked cabinet in the School of Arts and Sciences (Fremantle) of The University of Notre Dame Australia to ensure privacy. These materials will be held for a period of five years and then destroyed.

The following chapter outlines the research questions and attempts to position the research within the qualitative paradigm. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the chosen methodology is discussed and the semi-structured interview using IPA is described. The concept of the "epoche" in phenomenology is discussed, as is the method used to analyse the data.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins with a reference to the differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches to research and attempts to position the concepts of reliability, validity, theoretical saturation and triangulation within the qualitative framework. Golafshani (2003) indicates that this is especially important if researchers within the qualitative paradigm wish to reflect the multiple ways of establishing truth. However, before a discussion of research methodologies is presented, the research questions informing this study must be clarified.

3.1 Research questions

- What is the meaning and personal significance for the participants in this study of having completed three years of personal growth in a small group?

- What were the facilitator's experiences of how these participants embraced the process of personal growth?

- What link is there between personal growth and subsequent counsellor practice as observed by agency supervisors?

3.2 Quantitative research

Those undertaking research that uses the assumptions of logical positivism and employs experimental methods to test hypothetical generalisations are said to be involved in

quantitative research. Such research emphasises the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) write:

> *Charts and graphs illustrate the results of the research, and commentators employ words such as "variables", "populations", and "results" as part of their daily vocabulary … even if we do not always understand what all the terms mean we do know that this is part of the process of doing research. Research as it comes to be known publicly is a synonym for quantitative research.* (p. 4)

Quantitative research is about concepts to be studied and hypotheses to be tested. The emphasis is on facts and causes of behaviour. Numbers are important because they can be quantified and summarised. It follows then that results are expressed numerically and in statistical terminology. Statements of probability are made. Using this approach in research makes several assumptions; for example, that the world consists of observable, measurable facts.

Measurement means assigning numbers to objective data that is observable. There is also an attempt to generalise and extrapolate from the data to total populations. Emphasis is placed on rigorous scientific analysis, where "reliability and validity are tools of an essentially positivist epistemology" (Waitling, as cited in Winter, 2000, p. 7).

3.2.1   Reliability in quantitative research

Reliability, according to Joppe (2000), is the extent to which results are consistent over time and are an accurate representation of the total population under study. If the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology at another time, then the research instrument is said to be reliable. In this context therefore, reliability means that the results

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are replicable and repeatable. Kirk and Miller (1986) identify three types of reliability within the quantitative paradigm:

- The degree to which a measurement, given repeatedly, remains unchanged

- The stability of a measurement over time

- The similarity of measurements within the same time period.

Charles (1995) says that the consistency with which test items are answered or individual scores remain the same can be determined by using the test-retest method at two different times. This attribute is referred to as stability. If one is dealing with a stable measure, then the results should be similar or reliable.

3.2.2   Validity in quantitative research

Winter (2000) says that the traditional criteria for validity find their roots in the positivist tradition, and that they reside within the empirical conceptions of universal laws, evidence, objectivity, truth, actuality, deduction, reason, fact and mathematical data. According to Joppe (2000), validity determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are. Validity is often determined by asking a series of questions from which researchers look for answers by referring to the research of others.

Definitions of reliability and validity in quantitative research therefore seem to refer to whether the results are replicable and whether the means of measurement are accurate and measure what was intended. Qualitative researchers, however, view these concepts

differently and often consider them to be inadequate for their purposes. The issue of replicability in particular is of less concern to qualitative researchers than precision, credibility and transferability (Winter, 2000). It is in this context, says Kuhn (1970), that the two research approaches or perspectives are essentially different paradigms.

3.3   Qualitative research

Unlike quantitative researchers, who seek causal determination, prediction and generalisation of findings, qualitative researchers seek in-depth understanding, illumination and possible extrapolation to similar situations (Hoepfl, 1997). Extrapolation may be a problem in qualitative research due to the sample size, which is often considerably smaller than sample sizes in quantitative research. Qualitative researchers, however, would argue that it is depth of meaning that is being sought, rather than a statement of statistical probability.

Qualitative research uses a naturalistic or semi-structured setting that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomena of interest (Patton, 2001). Strauss and Corbin (1990) define qualitative research as "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (p. 182). The knowledge elicited from qualitative research is of a different kind than quantitative studies, not least because of the part played by the researcher. In quantitative research, the researcher attempts to dissociate themself from the research process; in qualitative research, the researchers come to embrace their involvement and role within the task.

3.3.1 Reliability and validity in qualitative research

While reliability and validity are treated separately in quantitative research, this is not the case in qualitative research. Instead, Patton (2001) suggests that a terminology that combines both reliability and validity is preferred and recommends terms like credibility, transferability and trustworthiness. But there remains some confusion in the literature, with Stenbacker (2001) suggesting the concept of reliability in qualitative research is irrelevant, as it is deduced by measurement. She argues that it is misleading, and goes further to say that if a qualitative study is discussed with reliability as a criterion, the consequence is that the study is somehow flawed. Healy and Perry (2000) suggest that the terms credibility, neutrality and confirmability be used in qualitative research, while Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest the term "dependability", as it corresponds to reliability in quantitative research. They go further and say that since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former (validity) is sufficient to establish the latter (reliability). Patton (2001) also seems to support this view by suggesting that reliability in any qualitative research is a consequence of the validity in a study.

The concept of validity in the context of qualitative research is not rigid or fixed (Golafshani, 2003), and is described by a wide range of terms. It is also true that some, like Creswell and Miller (2000), argue that the term validity is not relevant to qualitative research. However, although there is often a subjective element in using qualitative methodologies, most agree that there is a need for some attempt to ensure rigour in the research (Davies & Dodd, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999; Stenbecker, 2001). If the issue at stake is to find a way to differentiate "good" research from "bad" research, then maximising trustworthiness, quality and rigor will be important concepts for researchers in

any paradigm. Johnson (1997) states that if validity or trustworthiness can be tested and maximised, the results are more likely to be "credible" and "defensible".

The present study is firmly located in the qualitative paradigm using a phenomenological methodology. This appears appropriate because of the depth of meaning being sought by the study.

Punch (1998) says the differences between quantitative and qualitative methods in research may be viewed as a pre-specified versus unfolding continuum, with quantitative methods to the left of this continuum. Thus, quantitative research is characterised by well-developed research questions, bounded conceptual frameworks, controlled designs linking the often many variables, and highly structured data. In contrast, qualitative research is more versatile and diverse. It is more likely to move away from the left side of the continuum, whereby the structure of the design is not organised in advance but unfolds as the research work proceeds.

Qualitative research is also more integrated, in that it uses multiple strategies and methods. The range of what can count as data is wide, as are the methods for collecting them. This means that the qualitative approach cannot always be as neatly described as its quantitative counterpart.

Qualitative designs are more likely to delay conceptualising the data until much later in the research and are much less likely to artificially create a situation for research purposes. Qualitative research is essentially naturalistic, in that it gathers data from the real life situations of persons and events in their natural setting.

3.4   Triangulation

This is a strategy typically used for improving the validity and reliability of research findings. Cohen and Manion (1980) say triangulation may be defined as two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour. In its original sense, it refers to a technique of physical measurement used by maritime navigators, military strategists and surveyors using several locational markers in their endeavour to pinpoint a single spot. By analogy, triangulation techniques in the social sciences try to map out more fully the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from different standpoints. Mathison (1998) says triangulation is an attempt to control bias and establish valid propositions. It is important that in any qualitative research, the aim is to probe for a deeper understanding of, rather than examining the surface features of, the phenomenon under investigation. Triangulation may include multiple methods of data collection and data analysis, but it does not suggest fixed methods for all research. The methods chosen in triangulation to test reliability and validity of a study will depend on the criteria of the research.

There are different types of triangulation and not all of them are relevant to all qualitative research. They are:

- data triangulation, which uses different sources of data or information

- investigator triangulation, which involves using different investigators or evaluators

- theory triangulation, which involves using professionals from outside the discipline seeking congruence to establish validation in findings

- methodological triangulation, which involves the use of multiple quantitative and qualitative methods to study a program. This requires much greater resources than other forms of triangulation

- environmental triangulation, which uses different locations and is only used when it is thought that findings might be influenced by some environmental factor.

Creswell and Miller (2000) suggest that triangulation is an issue of validity where researchers search for convergence among different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study. This is indeed how it relates to the present study, in that the researcher, the participants and the research supervisor all viewed the transcribed interviews to ensure that there was a consensus regarding themes emerging from the data.

The present study uses data triangulation, in that it seeks data from three different sources. These are:

- the participants who have completed the small group experience

- the group facilitators who have witnessed the participants in the group

- the supervisors from the counselling agencies where these participants were on placement.

Investigator triangulation is also used, in that the researcher, the research supervisor and an independent research assistant (who is a registered psychologist and practicing counsellor) have all investigated the data in an attempt at verification. The participants were also asked to verify that the transcribed interviews truthfully and accurately reflected what they said. Other forms of triangulation appear to be inappropriate for this study.

3.5   Theoretical saturation – How many interviews are enough?

Saturation is a concept used in qualitative analysis and refers to a stage when new data constantly fail to yield new themes additional to those already identified. It is at this point in the analytical process that the data is said to be saturated. It is a concept used in non-probabilistic research to determine the appropriate sample size. However, Morse (1994) suggests that saturation is the key to excellent qualitative work, but there are no definitive guidelines or tests of adequacy for estimating the sample size required to reach saturation. This can cause difficulties for researchers when deciding how many interviews to arrange. Research that is field-oriented and not covered by statistical generalisability most commonly uses purposive sampling. This means that the participants in a study are purposefully selected according to predetermined criteria that seem relevant to a particular research question.

Guest et al. (2006) suggest that while many authors explain how to select participants (for example Bernard, 1995; Johnson, 1990; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse, 1994; Patton, 2001; Trotter, 1991), they could only find seven sources that provided actual sample sizes and these differed significantly from each other. Morse (1994)

recommends six participants for phenomenological studies, while Kuzel (1992) links his recommendations to sample heterogeneity and research objectives, recommending six to eight interviews for a homogenous sample.

Johnson (1990) suggests if the goal is to describe a shared perception, belief, or behaviour among a relatively homogenous group, then a sample of 12 will likely be sufficient. With regard to the question of sample size using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Smith (2003) says that there is "no right answer". He says that IPA studies have been published with samples of one, four, nine, and 15. He goes on to say that "as a rough guide five or six is a reasonable sample size for a student project" (p. 38), and suggests that this sample size should provide enough cases to examine similarities and differences, while ensuring that the researcher is not overwhelmed by the amount of data generated (p. 39). Using data from 60 in-depth interviews, Guest et al. (2006) found that saturation of themes occurred after 12 interviews, although basic elements for meta-themes were present as early as six interviews.

The literature therefore appears to support the view that a sample size of 12 should adequately produce saturation. This is the number of cases in the present study. Saturation of themes is even more likely, given that the sample is homogenous and all participants have had a similar experience. It is the meaning and interpretation of that meaning that this study investigates. However, although all the participants have had the same exposure to the small group they differ in the context of their lived experience of that milieu. This however, does not weaken the rigor of the research design as the qualitative paradigm supports the interpretation of the individuals interpretation of that experience, This phenomenological approach forms the backbone of the study.

3.6   Choice of research methodology

The choice of methods to be used in conducting research ought to be greatly influenced by the research questions. In the case of the present study, the questions to be answered are about meaning within a particular context. The research questions underlying this study are as reiterated as follows:

- What is the meaning and personal significance for these graduates of the small group personal growth experience during three years in this program?

- What are the observations of the group facilitators as to the experience of the participants of personal growth?

- Is there a link between the small group experience and subsequent counselling practice as observed by agency supervisors?

Qualitative researchers are interested in the essential character of something, rather than its size or amount. There is also an increasing worth being attributed to research being carried out within the social sciences using methodologies that seek understanding, meaning and depth. The interpretative approach to research, says Newman (2003), is the foundation of social research techniques that are sensitive to context and use various methods to get inside the ways others see the world. Newman (2003) goes to great length to justify the rationale that underpins social research and Interpretative Social Research in particular:

> *Interpretive researchers want to discover what actions mean to the people who engage in them. It makes little sense to try to deduce social life from abstract, logical theories that may not relate to the feelings and experiences of ordinary*

people. People have their own reasons for their actions and researchers need to learn the reasons people use. (p. 77)

It is crucial therefore, to consider individual motives even if they sometimes appear irrational, are often deeply emotional and may contain false facts or prejudices. Newman (2003) goes on to say that an interpretative research report ought to be a rich and detailed description of a person's experience and not an abstraction. He suggests the interpretive approach is the foundation of social research:

It is sensitive to context, uses various methods to access how others give meaning to their world and is more interested in achieving an empathic understanding than with testing laws of human nature. Interpretative analysis of a social setting has internal coherence and is rooted in the text. (p. 80)

The methodological approach used in the present study is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as described by Smith (2008).

3.7   Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a phenomenological approach within psychology that aims to explore how people make sense of their personal and social world. Smith (2008) describes IPA as "an attempt to unravel the meanings contained in accounts through a process of interpretive engagement with the text and transcripts"(p. 189).

This interpretive approach is linked to hermeneutics, which is a theory of meaning that originated in the nineteenth century (Newman, 2003). The term is derived from the god "Hermes" in Greek mythology who had the task of communicating the desires of the gods

to the mortals. Blaikie (1993) says the term "hermeneutic" "literally means making the obscure plain" (p. 28).

IPA is an approach concerned with interpreting the meaning the subject gives to their lived experience. It is often referred to as the "insider perspective" (Smith, 2008). Using IPA also requires the researcher to be an active participant in the process, rather than a passive observer. IPA involves a two-stage interpretation process, with the participants trying to make sense of their world, and the researcher trying to make sense of the subjects making sense of their world. This is referred to as a double hermeneutic, and Smith (2003) argues that the approach is intellectually linked to theories of interpretation as described by Ricoeur (1970). He distinguishes between two kinds of interpretation using "hermeneutics" to refer to a theory of interpretation.

According to Newman (2003), hermeneutics:

> *emphasises a detailed reading or examination of text which could refer to a conversation* [as is the case with the present study]*, written words or pictures. The researcher conducts a reading of the text to absorb the viewpoint it presents as a whole. True meaning is rarely simple or obvious on the surface; one reaches it only through a detailed study of the text, contemplating its many messages and seeking the connections among its parts.* (p. 75)

The two types of interpretation are: 1) the hermeneutics of meaning collection, which aims at faithful disclosure; and 2) the hermeneutics of suspicion which aims to discover a meaning that lies behind that which is being analysed, as in the practice of psychoanalysis. Palmer (1969) provides a useful description of hermeneutics, as the general theory of interpretive activity, as the method by which "something foreign, strange, separated in time,

or experience, is made familiar, present, comprehensible; something requiring representation, explanation or translation is somehow brought to understanding – is interpreted" (p. 14).

It is the method of meaning making which aims at faithful disclosure that is used in the present study and not the mode of suspicion. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) offers a discussion of hermeneutics in his early work, where he attempts an analysis of the everyday manner in which human beings go about their interpretative sense making. For Heidegger, we all live in an interpreted world. We are interpreters and understanders and we make meaning of the world in which we live. For qualitative research, the Interpretative Phenomenological approach provides a new view of the meaning of data. The researcher interprets the research participants' constructions of their world (Smith, 2008). Smith says that an empathic hermeneutic, as well as a questioning hermeneutic, is employed in an attempt to gain understanding of the lived experience of the participants by taking their side or trying to "feel" what their experience is actually like. IPA also acknowledges a debt to symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 1995) with its concern for how meanings are constructed within both a social and personal world.

Smith (2008) also states that IPA has a theoretical commitment to the person as a cognitive, affective and physical being and assumes a chain of connection between peoples' talk and their thinking and emotional states. The emphasis of IPA is on sense making or meaning making by both researcher and participant. This suggests an interesting alliance with the cognitive paradigm that is dominant in contemporary psychology. IPA shares a concern for mental processes with the areas of social cognition and clinical psychology, and is interested in questions that emerge within these domains (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). However,

IPA does differ from mainstream psychology in that it does not favour quantitative and experimental methodologies and is committed to an in-depth qualitative analysis. This commitment to meaning making, says Smith (2003), is evidence that IPA is linked closely to the original concerns of cognitive psychology in its rejection of the behaviourist tradition. Bruner (1986) suggests that psychology moved quickly away from meaning making towards the science of information processing. IPA in a sense appears to be somewhat of a reaction to such a move. Thus IPA and mainstream psychology converge in being interested in the examination of how people think, but diverge on how best to study this. Smith (2003) says that IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing and how they are making sense of their personal and social world. IPA is especially useful when one is concerned with complexity, process or novelty.

Examples of psychological research questions addressed using IPA include the following, as cited in Smith and Osborne (2008):

- How do gay men think about sex and sexuality? (Flowers et al., 1997)

- How do people with genetic conditions view changing medical technologies? (Chapman, 2002)

- How do people come to terms with the death of a partner? (Golsworthy & Coyle, 1999).

- How does a woman's sense of identity change during the transition to motherhood? (Smith, 1999)

- What model of the person do priests have? (Vignoles et al., 2004)

- How do people in the early stage of Alzheimer's disease perceive and manage the impact on their sense of self? (Clare, 2003)

- What influences the decision to stop therapy? (Wilson & Sperlinger, 2004)

- What forms of social support are available to people in pain? (Warwick et al., 2004)

- How does being HIV positive impact on personal relationships? (Jarman et al., 2005).

It is apparent that these questions are not simple and require a particular approach that minimises interviewer talk, while at the same time facilitating detailed expression on the part of the participants so that rich data is yielded. The credibility of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is greatly enhanced by linking theorists like George Kelly (1955) who described Personal Construct theory, Gordon Allport (1961) who adopted an ideographic approach to psychological research, suggesting the individual may be studied as a unique case, and George Mead (1934) who contributed significantly to the school of social research referred to as "Symbolic Interactionism". These theorists are held in very high esteem by their professional colleagues in terms of the early endeavours by psychology and psychologists to understand the human condition.

Smith (2008) suggests three examples of "good" phenomenological psychology in action, as follows:

1. Living through some positive experiences of psychotherapy

In research conducted by Giorgi and Gallegos (2005), clients in therapy were asked to describe some alleviation of symptoms that they may have experienced due to psychotherapy. The descriptions were broad enough so that they were able to be characterised as positive experiences. Positive experiences were easy to come by, but they took place within a context that also included negative experiences and lack of progress. Instrumental to the existence of positive experiences was a high quality relationship with the therapist, which was safe, caring, trusting and non-judgemental. Phenomenological reflections on the empirical findings (1) indicated that focused symptom relief was not necessarily the best strategy for outcome evaluation of therapy; (2) threw doubt on the termination of therapy as a good criterion for the experience of therapy; and (3) concluded that the relationship between therapist and client is complex but unified in a way that needs further clarification.

2. The acquisition of bulimia; childhood experience

Day (2004) examined the childhood experiences that seem to be preparatory for the onset of bulimia. Three women's serial experiences of bulimia (as reported in four interviews describing specific binge-purge episodes) were investigated and one pattern of experiencing bulimia emerged. As the interview process deepened, the data moved from symptom-related to life-related. The general structure that captured the essence of the lived experiences varied as these women lived out their unique lives. The women reported having

family backgrounds in which they experienced a sense of diminished self and dissatisfaction in interactions with significant others and self. Their need for the mastery and control ordinarily lacking in their lives became a symptomatic expression that had relevance for them in respect to the deep psychological pain that was only partially expressed. The phenomenal body and self were given priority over objective reality, resulting in distorted perceptions of "fatness" and feelings of terror regarding fat.

3. The lived experience of spontaneous altruism: a phenomenological study

In Mastains' (2002) study, three participants wrote descriptions of situations in which they engaged in spontaneous acts of altruism. Altruism was defined as a motivational state, with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare. These descriptions were then expanded and clarified through a follow-up interview. The results of the phenomenological analysis produced a structure of the lived experience of spontaneous altruism, consisting of 15 constituent themes. Mastains (2002) states:

> *These themes detail the complex emotional, psychological, and mental processes that work together in the experience of spontaneous altruism. They also point to the possible roles of love, spirituality, ego-autonomy and creativity in the experience of altruism.* (p. 50)

The numbers involved in studies using IPA are typically small. The aim is to say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of a particular group. This is described as an ideographic approach, as opposed to a nomothetic approach which predominates in psychology. A nomothetic approach is concerned with analysis of populations and large groups so that probabilistic claims can be made about the groups being studied. An ideographic approach, because it is derived from examining individual case studies, allows

specific statements to be made about these individuals and in greater depth. It is far less important to make general claims in probabilistic terms resulting from the research than it is to examine in a detailed manner individual transcripts to ascertain meaning and significance, as is the case with the present study.

Such studies highlight that IPA uses broadly and openly framed questions in an attempt to explore in detail an area of concern. In the present study, the interpretation of the participants' responses is an attempt to convey to the reader an explanation of the lived experience of being a member of the small personal growth group as part of counsellor training.

3.8   The sample in IPA and in the present study

IPA uses a purposive sampling method to select a homogenous group. This means that the participants in a study are purposefully, rather than randomly, selected according to predetermined criteria that seem relevant to a particular research question. It is important to remember here that Guest et al. (2006) clearly state that theoretical saturation is complete following 12 interviews and often on completion of six. In the present study, eight recently graduated counsellors (i.e. who had graduated within the two years prior to the commencement of the study) were invited to take part in conversations regarding their personal opinions, understandings and feelings related to the small group experience. Five women and three men were invited to take part. This was an attempt to reflect the female: male ratio that exists in enrolments for the counselling programs (i.e. almost twice as many women as men).

Although these graduates were given an invitation to take part, and specifically advised that participation was voluntary, all of those invited were enthusiastic regarding their participation and none expressed reservations about taking part. All of them had had this small group experience over a three-year period as undergraduate students in the Bachelor of Counselling program at The University of Notre Dame Australia. The age range of those taking part in the study was from 36 to 56 years. Two of the female participants were single mothers and three were married. Each of the three male participants was married.

To introduce some triangulation to the research, additional perspectives were sought from two group facilitators of these counselling students and two supervisors from counselling agencies where these students were on placement. One facilitator was a registered psychologist (a man aged 52 years). He is trained specifically in group facilitation and is an experienced counsellor/therapist, with twenty years experience both in Australia and overseas. This facilitator favours a Gestalt approach. This approach places emphasis on immediacy and the "here and now" and acknowledges the part played by the body as the person experiences emotional distress. The other facilitator (a woman aged 49 years) was an occupational therapist in private practice for 20 years, and is also specifically trained in Gestalt group facilitation. These facilitators were purposefully chosen and invited to take part. They have both been facilitating personal growth groups at The University of Notre Dame Australia for six years. Both were enthusiastic and gave generously of their time.

Interviews were also held with two supervisors in counselling agencies (both women) who had had ongoing exposure to these graduates as senior students and more recently as employees in these agencies. One of these supervisors is a social worker by training, with 23 years experience as a counsellor and counsellor supervisor and trainer. The other supervisor works in a managerial capacity in the agency, but also runs counselling groups where senior students are participant observers. These supervisors were chosen to offer an industry perspective on the graduates because they had observed them with real clients in practice.

The total number of participants therefore was 12, as follows:

- Graduates: 8

- Facilitators: 2

- Agency supervisors: 2

3.9   Method of data collection

The semi-structured interview is seen as a flexible data collection method (Smith, 2003). This approach to data collection allows the researcher and subject to engage in a dialogue whereby the responses made by the subject guide the researcher to probe a little deeper so that greater meaning is understood. The questions guiding the process in this study were as follows:

3.9.1 Questions asked of graduates

- What expectations did you have of the personal growth group at the beginning of your studies?

- What was the experience of the personal growth group like for you?

- Would you say you have personally changed over the last three years? And if so, how?

- In what way do you consider the experience of the small group to have been a part of this change?

- In what way did this experience challenge you?

- What would you have liked to happen during these groups that would have made the experience more worthwhile for you?

- What would you have preferred not to have occurred in this experience for you?

- What else do you need or desire to say to me about this topic?

3.9.2 Questions asked of facilitators

- What in your view were the expectations that students had as they engaged with personal development training in the first instance?

- What do you believe the experience was like for them?

- Would you say students changed over time? If so, how did you observe this?

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- What would you say was the greatest influence in terms of this change?

- What in your view might have happened to make it more worthwhile for participants?

- Can you describe things that happened in the group that you would have preferred not to have happened?

- What else would you like to say about this topic?

3.9.3 Questions asked of agency supervisors

- How do you experience the students on placement here, from the counselling program at The University of Notre Dame Australia?

- What do you notice, if anything, that is different about these students compared to other students of counselling on placement at your agency?

- What experience are these students exposed to on placement?

- Overall, how do these students cope with this exposure?

- What else would you like to say to me about these students and your experience of them?

The preceding questions were formulated on the basis they would yield responses that would answer the main research question; namely "What is the meaning and personal significance of the small group personal growth experience?" The questions were open-ended to allow for more expansive responses.

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It is important to provide a critical explanation of the semi-structured interview as a method commonly used in qualitative research and used specifically to gather data in this study.

3.10 The interview process

Interviewing may be defined simply as a conversation with a purpose; within the research paradigm, that purpose is to gather information (Babbie, 2000; Denzin, 2001; De Santis, 1980; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 2001; Salkind, 1991, 1996; Spradley, 1979).

While there is strong consensus as to the definition of an interview, there is less agreement about how to conduct one. The extensive literature on interviewing contains numerous descriptions of the process. It has been described as a technical skill almost like changing a plug (Roth, 1996) and also a game in which the respondents receive intrinsic rewards (Holdstrum, cited in Manning, 1967). More recently, Denzin (2001) suggested that interviews should be more than information-gathering devices; they should be reflexive and reflect the performance aspect of life and the social sciences. Denzin (2001) states: "I want to re-read the interview, not as a method of gathering information, but as a vehicle of producing performance texts and performance ethnographies about self and society" (p. 24).

Field research is sometimes divided (albeit simplistically) into two separate phases, namely gaining access to the data and then analysing that data (Shaffir et al., 1980). Securing access to a setting includes the participants and a knowledge of phenomena and activities being observed. Analysis is about making sense of and interpreting the information

accessed. The method used in the present study to gather the data was the semi-structured interview.

3.10.1 The qualitative semi-structured interview

No consideration of interviewing would be complete without reference to the major interview structures. These are sometimes called "the family of qualitative interviews" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). These categories are:

- the structured interview

- the unstructured interview

- the semi-structured interview.

The structured or standardised interview consists of a clear set of questions that allow no deviation. The participants can sometimes feel frustrated if they have a "story" to tell and are not allowed to do so. The responses are brief and this type of interviewing can slip easily into the positivist tradition if the data is reduced to numbers.

In contrast, the unstructured or non-standardised interview may seem simple, but in reality can have many problems. It can sometimes lead to participant anxiety, as the subjects are often uncertain what the issues are. There is also a difficulty in comparability between interviews because of the diverse nature of the data these interviews yield.

The semi-standardised interview is more or less structured. This will depend on the topic under investigation and also on the relationship between researcher and participant. The questions are recorded during the interview (usually verbatim). It is important to do this so

that depth of meaning is not missed. The wording of the questions is flexible, although it usually consists of a number of predetermined questions and special topics. Sometimes referred to as a guided conversation, this type of interview allows high interviewer involvement, although it results in low interviewer speech count.

The interview is a relationship and issues of respect, vulnerability and power are important. Ethical considerations feature highly and include confidentiality and security of information. The semi-structured interview also allows for creativity and spontaneity on the part of the researcher because the interviewer is able to use probes appropriately. This is an attempt to support the participant to say what needs to be said and to bring clarity to the content being addressed. In the present study, it was important to offer general leads using the questions cited earlier in an attempt to get the participant to express deeper meaning and personal significance without influencing the content in any way. In the semi-standardised interview, the interviewer is able to empathise with the subject while at the same time engaging in the dance that allows this process to yield rich data regarding the subject's insights, beliefs, internal constructions and feelings. The interview is an intimate experience and ought to be treated with the utmost respect.

Throughout the interviewing process, the interviewer projects a certain image and must be aware of the role they are playing. Non-verbal aspects of communication, including eye contact, body gestures, hand signals, head nodding and tone of voice are important, as is appropriate use of silence. Some observers suggest that, allowing for paralanguage (tone of voice, emphases, etc.), only seven per cent of communication is verbal (Morris, 1997). The interviews conducted in the present study used many of the micro-skills of communication

stated above so that a respectful and comfortable experience could be created for each participant.

The duration of the interview is important and usually it should not last longer than an hour. This is as much to ensure participant comfort as to allow the researcher to attend sufficiently to the conversation. Initially, the interviews undertaken in this study were planned to be of 60 minutes duration. However, all interviews exceeded 60 minutes and yielded more than 30,000 words of transcribed material. It is important to acknowledge that interview subjects supplied their personal time to share their ideas and feelings with the researcher.

There is also the issue of saturation or information overload for the researcher. The researcher needs to stay focused on the relevant topic and care is needed to guide the conversation in a manner that ensures that inappropriate input is kept to a minimum. This is often referred to as tracking, whereby the interviewer walks beside the interviewee in a supportive manner. In this study, the researcher interviewed only one participant in any one day to ensure that proper attention and focus could be offered to each person participating in the study.

The physical environment is also important and care needs to be taken that the subject is comfortable. This includes managing intrusions; for example, ensuring that telephones and cell phones are switched off and placing a sign on the door saying "Do not disturb – interview in progress". The temperature of the room, as well as lighting and colour, can all influence the interview and determine what, and how much, is revealed. In this study, all interviews were held in a private therapy room where there would be no intrusions,

appropriate temperature and lighting were ensured and all participants were asked if they were comfortable and ready to proceed with the interview. The recording microphone was placed at an appropriate distance and was non-intrusive to the participants. Participants were not hurried and all finished at different times. All participants were asked the same questions.

The concept of self-disclosure is an important one in counselling and is encouraged in a way that allows the counsellor to see the "bigger picture" and the client's worldview with themselves within it. The semi-structured interview as a research method bears great similarity in form to the counselling interview, and although it is primarily about gathering information from participants, it is also of such import that significant ethical issues need to be addressed. It is important to begin well, with an introduction of oneself and of the topic. Explanation of the rationale for the research and discussion of boundaries played an important part in setting the atmosphere for the interviews conducted in this study. Permission to audio-tape the interview was sought and acknowledged as an important consideration. Participants were informed that recording the interview would be the preferred case and the rationale for this was explained to them. A considerable amount of time was therefore spent in discussion with participants prior to the interviews taking place so that full understanding and informed consent could take place. Conversations were held by telephone in the first instance to determine whether there was a willingness on the part of the participants to take part in the study. It was emphasised at all times that there was no compulsion to take part.

Ending the interview was also important. It seemed to be appropriate to arrange possible future contact if the participants felt the need to do so, although none of them did. It was

also agreed to share results. The semi-structured interview used in this study asked a set number of questions of each participant in an environment created as comfortable and supportive. The researcher adopted the role of the "miner traveller" (Kvale, 1996), whereby the miner digs for the information while the traveller is like a friend on the journey. Some ice-breaking questions were asked at the beginning to allay anxiety and settle the subjects. These included checking comfort levels and re-visiting the issue of consent.

Although the questions in a semi-structured interview are pre-determined and asked in a systematic and consistent manner, there is a flexibility accorded to the interviewer which allows or even encourages them to probe and encourage the subject to embellish their story. It is important that the words used in the separate questions are understood by, and are relevant to, the subject. It is as though the question should "speak to the person", so that the responses have a high degree of relevance to the research question. As Berg (2004) says, "researchers must approach the world from the subject's perspective" (p. 81).

It is very useful to offer general leads to the subject in the form of prompts; for example, "Uh huh" or "And then?", or simply saying "Could you say a little more about that?" Other useful interventions in the form of prompts or probes can be in the form of gentle encouragers; for example, "That is very interesting, please say more". When the subject experiences the researcher as being interested, it acts as a positive reinforcer and the likelihood of further disclosure taking place is enhanced.

It is also important not to understate the role of non-verbal aspects of interpersonal communication, as much meaning is conveyed through them. Morris (1997) identifies these as:

- eye contact

- tone of voice

- hand signals

- facial expression

- body posture

- non-verbal gestures

- postural echo

- non-verbal leakage.

When the researcher is attempting to access meaning and depth of understanding, it is imperative that the subject is encouraged to respond. This is much more likely when open-ended questions are asked. These are questions that do not have a "yes" or "no" answer as an option. To be effective in communicating, the researcher must convey to the subject what it is they wish to know. This may also have a cultural implication, especially if the subject is from a culture that sees the world in a different way to the researcher. The questions asked must accommodate this. Much of the success of the qualitative researcher using a semi-structured interview will depend on intuitive responses by the interviewer to the responses of the subjects. This is not predictable, as no one knows how the subject will respond.

For this present study, a predetermined set of questions, presented earlier, was set prior to the interviews taking place. There was a genuine attempt to make contact and establish rapport with each subject being interviewed. The schedule of questions was intended to guide rather than dictate the interview. This allowed the subjects greater freedom to self-disclose during the interview. There was an attempt by the researcher to enter the psychological and social world of the subject. There is a freedom within the method of IPA that allows the subject to introduce issues that the researcher has not considered. Smith (2008) refers to the respondent as an experiential expert on the matter for discussion, and suggests that they ought to be offered maximum opportunity to tell their own story.

3.10.2 The interviewer and interviewees

The researcher in the present study is the coordinator of all counselling programs at The University of Notre Dame Australia (Fremantle campus). It is here that the study was undertaken. He is an experienced counselling psychologist and holds a specialist title with the Psychologist's Board of Western Australia. He is a full member of the Counselling College of the Australian Psychological Society and is bound by its code of ethics. He is also a former registered and comprehensively trained mental health nurse and a registered nurse educator, trained through the Department of Community Medicine, University College, Dublin, Ireland. His expertise is considerable both in the clinical counselling area as well as in counselling education. He is also a trained career guidance teacher. The selection of participants was purposefully undertaken so that the information would be relevant to the research question. Only those who had participated in the experiential groups were selected as participants. The specific persons were selected in alphabetical

order and all were informed as to the purpose of the research. An invitation was sent to each participant and a telephone call was conducted to absolutely emphasise that participation in the study was voluntary and that honesty and frankness were imperative to yield an accurate picture. This was an attempt to encourage participants to feel a freedom to refer to negative, as well as positive, aspects of their experience. There is evidence that they did this on examination of the transcribed interviews. Participants were all assured that there was no correct or incorrect answer to any of the questions. They were informed that the personal significance and meaning was what the researcher was searching for.

3.11 The "epoche" or bracketing

The analysis of the data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis [IPA] followed a number of stages, as described below. However, prior to any attempt at analysis, it was considered imperative to engage in "epoche" or bracketing. This is where the researcher sets aside (as far as is humanly possible) all preconceived experiences to best understand the experiences of the participants in the study (Moustakas, 1994). It is important to remember that the researcher must assume a psychological perspective and be mindful of the phenomenon being studied (in this case, the meaning and personal significance of the small group experience). Smith (2008) says that the researcher must immerse themself in the collection of data, as well as the interpretation of it, to truly appreciate the "lived world" of each participant. In phenomenological research that follows strictly the position adopted by Husserl (1982), the suspension of all presuppositions is necessary to reveal the "essence" of an experience in terms of its meaning. This was something that emerged from Husserl's "transcendental reduction", allowing the contemplation of detached

consciousness. Merleau-Ponty (1996) later interpreted Husserl's work in an existential way and "bracketing" became the intention or resolve to set aside theories, research presuppositions and ready-made interpretations from earlier experiences so that real lived experience could be revealed.

Wall et al. (2004) suggest that the phenomenological researcher is driven to strive for the true "essence" or meaning of the phenomenon under scrutiny and to present it as it truly appears to the participants. It is for this reason, therefore, that an attempt is made by the researcher to hold their own experiences, preconceptions, beliefs and attitudes in abeyance.

Bednall (2006) says:

> *The fact that a researcher may have had similar experiences within the context of proposed research objectives is extolled in the literature as being potentially of heightened significance to the data (Crotty 1996: Schulz 1994) but this is entirely governed by the success with which a researcher designs and applies procedures for the operation of the epoche and bracketing.* (p. 2)

The participants in the present study were asked to disclose their personal experience of personal growth group involvement as part of their counselling training. There was an obligation on the part of the researcher to separate his past experience of similar groups and later, on interpreting the data, to use that past experience and connect it interpretatively to the expressed meanings of the participants. This connected relationship, says Bednall (2006), is only made possible by engaging in epoche or bracketing.

There is not an obvious clarity in the literature regarding how epoche or bracketing is actually achieved, and some believe that it is actually impossible to achieve the degree of

objectivity required for authentic epoche or bracketing, especially if the researcher has had the experience of the phenomenon under examination (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Colaizi, 1978; Porter, 1993). Myerhoff and Ruby (1992, cited in Ahern, 1999) seem to favour the term "reflexivity" whereby the researcher makes an attempt to understand the impact of previous personal experiences on how they interpret the data. They suggest that this is better than making futile attempts to eliminate such experience in total. Patton (1990) attempts to distinguish between epoche and bracketing. He described epoche as "an ongoing analytic process" (1990, p. 480). This implies that it should be dynamically integrated into the sequential progress of the whole research method from the very beginning. Bracketing, on the other hand, would occur at interpretive moments when the data is being scrutinised for meaning. The researcher then allows the personal feelings and ideas held in epoche to synthesise with the interpreted data. This is called re-integration by Gearing (2004) and it consists of "unbracketing and subsequent reinvestment of the bracketed data into the larger investigation" (p. 1434). This can be illustrated figuratively as follows:

Figure 2: Epoche
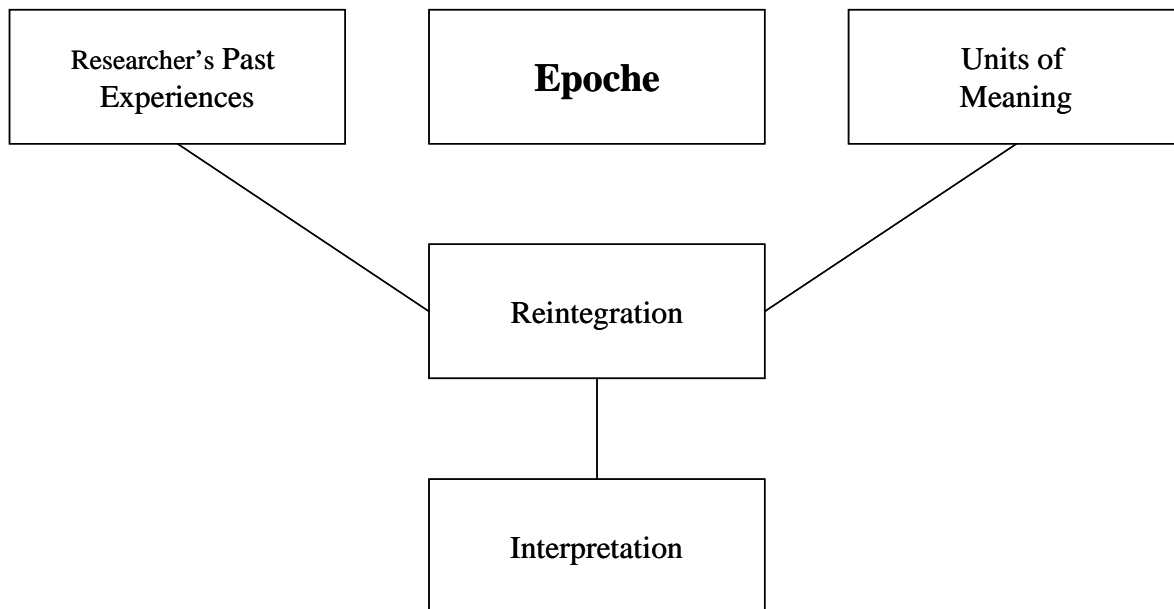
Source: Gearing (2004)

The concept appears to be that the personal thoughts, evaluations and earlier experiences of the researcher are acknowledged and held in abeyance (the epoche), a process that occurs throughout the pre-empirical and post-empirical phases of the research. Prior to the interpretation of the data there is then a reintegration of the units of meaning identified in the transcribed interviews with the participants. According to Gearing (2004), this occurs as a result of un-bracketing or removing the brackets.

It is probably true to say, however, that it is much easier to state what epoche is than to actually achieve it in reality or to make it real. Bednall (2006) says that a habit of thinking that utilises epoche is necessary but not sufficient. There are steps that one can take however, as suggested by Wall et al. (2004):

1. The researcher must ask the question very early on in the project: "What am I taking for granted or assuming here?"

2. The researcher should engage with a research diary to ensure that they stay in intimate contact with each participant's response.

3. The researcher should take exact care and attention with regard to the interviews. In the present study, only one interview per day was held. This made reflection easier and the notes taken immediately following each interview provided a solid basis for comparison to the transcribed text.

4. The researcher should use reflective practice to continually question what is happening in the research process.

5. The researcher should continually ask the questions "Is it possible that I could be fooling myself?" and "Am I seeing or hearing what I wish to?" These questions at the very least depict an aspiration to being open to the truth of what the participants are saying. They are a constant reminder that rigor is required when analysing data.

In the present study, notes taken immediately following each interview were studied in conjunction with the recorded interview, as well as the transcription of each interview. The purpose of this was certainly to determine meaning, but also to listen to tone of voice, emphasis on certain words or phrases, silences and the duration of silence within each interview, as well as sighing, laughter and mood. All of these are relevant to the meaning that each participant expressed, and disclose in detail the experience of the phenomenon

under scrutiny, namely the personal significance and meaning of personal growth group membership while in training to be a professional counsellor.

The steps described above, when used in the present study, appear to have had dependable outcomes. This is indicated by the fact that it was not difficult to identify 12 major conclusions from an analysis of the data using IPA (see Chapter 5). The themes identified from the tape recorded interviews were listed as identified by the researcher and using again, the steps suggested by Wall et al (2004) the major themes were identified. These identified themes give a very good insight into the meaning and significance of the personal growth experience for the participants.

3.12 Analysing the data using IPA

According to Smith (2008), there are three separate stages in the analysis of data using IPA.

3.12.1 Stage 1 – Themes

Having transcribed the data verbatim, the transcripts were read and read again. Observations regarding the data included themes, summaries, metaphors and use of words or questions. The overriding purpose was the interpretation of meaning that the participants gave to their experience. This is not a probabilistic study; it is not about extrapolating data to a larger population, as is usually the case in a nomothetic study. Detailed case by case analysis of individual transcripts is time-consuming, but the aim is to say something in detail of the perceptions and personal understandings of this purposefully selected group, rather than attempting to make general claims for larger populations. The central focus for

the researcher and the participants alike was on the question "What was this experience like for you? – that is, on meaning and significance.

3.12.2 Stage 2 – Generating theme titles

This stage is called horizontalisation (Moustakas, 1994) and involves a process where each significant statement of relevance is given equal value. This required further reading of the transcripts to identify and label themes that characterised each section. This meant transforming initial themes into concise phrases that aimed to capture the essence of what was found in the text. This essential, invariant structure, or essence, is important when carrying out phenomenological studies. The goal of the phenomenologist is to reduce the textual (what) and structural (how) meanings of the experience to a brief description that typifies the experiences of all the participants in the study. It is because all individuals experience it that it is said to be invariant and this process therefore represents a reduction to the "essentials" of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). It is an attempt to distil the data. Themes were recorded on the right-hand side of the transcript.

3.12.3 Stage 3 – Connecting the themes

This is the stage when the researcher looks for relationships between themes. Repetitive and overlapping statements are removed and statements are clustered into meaning units. Some themes emerge as ordinate concepts; for example, "a profound experience". Subordinate themes might be "a shift" or "a change". In the case of the present study, each transcript needed to be analysed for themes on an individual basis and a master list was produced to identify the essence of the experiences. Each transcript was offered to the

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participant interviewed to check if the transcript was a true and valid account of what was said. All participants responded within 14 days as requested, and 11 of the 12 participants made no changes to the content other than grammatical corrections. One participant added further information, but insisted that she wished to remain true to her initial responses. This additional information was included with the transcribed interviews.

The next chapter outlines the process of analysing the data.

CHAPTER 4. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ANALYTIC PROCESS IN THE PRESENT STUDY

Analysis of the data in this study involved transcribing each of the 12 interviews verbatim. Each of the transcriptions was examined individually in detail before moving on to examine the others, case by case. According to Smith and Smith (1995), this follows the idiographic approach to analysis. This means beginning with particular examples and only slowly working up to more general categorisation or claims.

The interviews were read in the order in which they were carried out. The transcribed interviews had been returned to each participant to seek verification as to the content. All participants were asked to read their interview carefully in order to see if they wished to add or subtract anything from it. A stamped and addressed envelope was provided to facilitate an easy response. Eleven participants returned the transcribed interview within seven days. The remaining participant added a further page in the form of a letter, explaining how she wished to make only the smallest of changes and that she wanted to remain true to her earlier comments. Some (four) participants corrected what they saw as grammatical errors. In essence, there were no changes made to the interviews as transcribed.

A phenomenological study seeks to gather depth of meaning from the participants, and there is always a hermeneutical element with regard to how the researcher understands and interprets what the participant says. There is always, therefore, a necessary attempt on the part of the researcher to give meaning to the meaning as it is expressed by the participant.

The term "careful description" is used by Husserl (1960) with reference to how one should communicate objects of consciousness.

Initially, the researcher wished to look for common themes or meanings of personal significance within the data. However, having been immersed in the data for several readings, it became apparent that although there were obvious common themes, there were also statements expressed by the participants of a deep and very personal nature. There were, in fact, statements of meaning and personal significance for each participant. This is important because the research question was to examine the meaning and personal significance of the small group experience for a purposefully selected and homogenous sample.

It was decided therefore, in the first instance, to report and outline responses from the data on a subject by subject or case by case basis, in order to abstract the real depth of meaning from each participant. This was particularly applicable to the responses from the graduates and facilitators; the two interviews with the agency supervisors yielded a different perspective and were also reported separately. All graduates were coded as G1, G2, G3 etc., up to G8. The code dictated the order in which the interviews were undertaken (for example, G1 was the first interview, G2 was the second and so on). It was only when this exercise was complete that common themes were correctly identified and shown to have an obvious connection to each participant's responses. This method of presenting the data gives the reader a deeper understanding of the significance the experience has had for each of the participants, including the facilitators.

The following sections include verbatim accounts of what the graduates, facilitators and agency supervisors actually said. These are their words, extracted from the interviews by the researcher, and are considered to be of importance and significance with regard to the experience each participant has had.

Once each transcript had been analysed using the interpretative process, a final table of major themes and sub-themes was constructed (see sections 4.4 and 4.5). These themes were not selected on the basis of prevalence alone. Other factors within the data, including richness of a particular passage, or the passion or intensity of expression from a participant within the interview, were also taken into account. As new themes emerged from the transcripts, earlier transcripts were reviewed so that similarities in meaning could be identified. IPA has a theoretical commitment to the person as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being and assumes a chain of connection between a person's thinking, talking, feelings and their body. Interpretation therefore is challenging because the researcher is required to make sense of what people say, as well as how it is said. This also includes their emotional state or feeling state at the time of the interview.

4.1   Sample of graduate responses

On completion of transcription of the interviews it became obvious that the information was shared in great detail and with significant emotional overtones. The researcher was of the opinion that an extended sample of the actual responses would bring an understanding to the reader of what the experience was actually like.

4.1.1 Participant G1: Female

It was something of an unknown. I found it difficult yet wonderful. It was challenging, anxiety ridden and rewarding for me. Never once did I not like it and I know that the experience was leading to the fruits...

It was a deepening experience where I went beyond what was comfortable for me.

I feel personally changed ... absolutely changed and more self-aware ... more aware of my own stuff ... things I did know but didn't think of became obvious to me. I became aware of why I would say certain things and became more self-knowledgeable.

I also became aware of boundaries and my own feelings. I experienced dangerous emotions at times ... having to go to a place that I am not comfortable with. I am more self-accepting, self-trusting, almost like a transformation has taken place for me.

I was risking being exposed within the group and this was scary ... pretty scary for me.

I was scared that things might get out of control and witnessing aggression unnerved me.

I found it unsettling to observe this. This is why a good facilitator is important.

There was much learning for me ... it began when I started to disclose a little.

I learned that I don't have to be something that I am not ... I am more aware of my feelings and feel more free to say that I am unsure. I feel less risky, more self-revealing ... so what? It does not have a power like it used to have.

The experience of the group was like a dawning ... the dynamic of a dawning and not just my own stuff. Our responses to what happens is the key.

4.1.2 Participant G2: Female

Felt a little unsure ... had no expectations of what might happen in the group.

It was a little bit of a catastrophe at first ... some had no idea. I knew it was to find out about myself ... It was about me ... looking into myself ... and understanding myself in relation to others in the group. While I gained greater self-awareness, it was bedlam in the second year ... it got my shackles up a bit ... I got a bit angry being backed into a corner ... the experience was absolute bedlam for me. They (group members) *kept poking ... stepping over my boundaries ... the facilitators didn't step in at all. Personal growth was absolutely pandemonium for me and I was having personal therapy outside as well. Second year was not a good experience for me at all ... it was very painful and damaging for me in hindsight ... it was a terrible, terrible year ... the group was too big and I don't think the facilitator knew what to do. She got very, very angry when I told her I thought she was voyeuristic.*

I feel most definitely changed ... much had to do with second year ... absolutely huge part of the change ... and huge self-knowledge.

In third year I felt more like an adult while in first year more like a child ... I learned that I could say that I didn't wish to go there ... I had a greater sense of freedom ... I knew that I had choices ... I understood my own triggers ... and I didn't want to look like an idiot. People would challenge me and I distinctly felt a shift happen for me in third year. I learned to share myself more when I chose to do it rather than being triggered into it. Digging a bigger hole for myself in front of my peers taught me about awareness ... I can now sit with clients and understand the process that is going on inside my head as well. Yeah ... from personal growth I can understand my own process. I would have liked the facilitators to challenge those who were not working in the group.

I have been asked in the agency as to how I get my self-awareness ... that depth about myself.

People shifted in third year … it was more productive.

Out of the bedlam and pain there was growth … absolutely. This experience has definitely made me the person I am today. I think my empathy has come from being confronted.

4.1.3   Participant G3: Female

A lot of support … I felt supported. It taught me to express myself and to express what I was feeling. I got to be human, to be me, and I got to express myself.

To listen to someone else and their experience and manage that within myself helped me accept my wounds … my pain.

Hearing others express … whatever they had … sometimes in silence … sometimes an exercise uncovers something … grounding exercises – projective exercises.

It was absolutely a positive experience for me.

I have changed due to personal growth.

I wanted to change, to learn, to accept, to understand … learning how to be safe within myself … as long as I know I am okay with myself … I am okay with my own stuff.

Personal growth for me is about being.

The biggest challenge for me was to confront people … I had a fear of not being able to express myself and not be understood.

I felt anger and resentment and I got the opportunity to express these emotions in the group.

The fear of affecting someone else is where my challenge comes from … being exposed to that … being given the opportunity where I could grow … I could be honest … and say this is what I am experiencing.

To be challenged was really positive because it allowed me to grow.

To see my situation from other viewpoints ... to ponder ... contemplate ... journal ... and talk about it ... this was huge growth.

The second year group was too big and some people seemed not to grab the light. For me, it was everything I could have wanted ... support, availability ... so much was uncovered for me.

I would not have been able to go through Uni without personal growth. The amount of support I got cleared things for me and I was able to focus.

4.1.4   Participant G4: Female

Was always looking forward to it and expected it to be an encouraging experience. I saw it as something to help me stay in touch with my confidence. I expected it to be very supportive ... an affirmation and encouragement of myself in the process ... and to learn about myself. I found that I have personally changed ... absolutely ... over three years. It was an opportunity ... a dozen other ways of seeing the world ... and of feedback ... and very valuable.

I felt safe in the group ... challenged not to set limits for myself ... not to retreat from what the group had to offer. I felt embarrassed in front of people although I think people still held me in huge regard and it didn't alter the way people saw me ... I realised this. It was reassuring for me to learn that it is okay to be embarrassed in front of people ... nothing terrible happened and it is not the end of the world. It gives me courage to be in this kind of place again. I learned how other people might experience me. It is rare to have that kind ...

The memory (of the experience) *helps me to be empathic with clients. The personal growth experience has helped feed my compassion.*

I found it extremely worthwhile to explore boundaries and confidentiality.

Being in a personal growth group has made it easier to maintain my own level of integrity and respect for others.

Reflecting on self and others and receiving feedback … the personal growth group I thought was the core of the course.

I learned from everyone in the group … even those I disagreed with. It was an invaluable part of integrating other things we have learned. It was of a similar dimension of like going to counselling ourselves. Counsellors ought to have the experience of being counselled. It is about being accepted by others … a very rich resource at a personal level. I valued the experience.

4.1.5   Participant G5: Female

It was the most profound experience of my life … it was huge.

I had always sort of felt that I could feel everyone else's issues, pain and feelings, but I could never feel my own.

In year two I was asked by the facilitator "How do you feel?"

I would talk on behalf of the world and say "Well … I think that" … and the facilitator said "Well … what do you feel?" And I thought, I don't like this … I felt vulnerable, inadequate and empty. I got cross and angry … incredibly emotional and wondered "What has she touched here?"… I didn't know how to feel.

It was the personal growth group (that) *gave me the questions, allowed me to be heard and no one else was allowed to talk, so it gave me the floor to carry on from that.*

… From that point on it was like a whole renewal and I started to own my feelings. Whatever I was feeling … It was just like self-awareness … just looking at myself and not deferring or touching or lime-lighting someone else; it is just saying "yeah … this is who I am, I do not have to ask someone else's opinion about how I ought to feel or see".

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I was given the floor and silence prevailed ... I didn't care who was in the group in the end ... I was just to be heard ... I found that so important.

Women are meant to be heard and not to be delved too deeply into their issues or whatever ... and personal growth gave me that ... absolutely.

The challenge came when I did expose what I felt ... I would feel so vulnerable ... and the vulnerability was the challenge to actually get stronger.

Vulnerable, like a shaky feeling inside ... a feeling of nerves.

Then, people responded to my openness within the group. I said what it was like for me, like self-disclosure ... absolutely. So I began to talk about myself ... which I had hidden for 18 months ... unbeknown ... unconsciously. It was like a re-birthing.

Sometimes we would touch other people's issues which were so hugely deep and I would think "Wow ... How are you going to get through that in order to help the client?"

These issues held the group, sometimes week after week.

A huge lesson for me was to listen and give space.

I was risking finding emptiness, finding the hollow shell that I still wonder if I have.

I am not a group person so that was a big challenge.

Once again it was the most profound experience because of the feeling stuff.

Of all the units it has been the biggest learning curve to me. I am just blinded by it ... I really was. Personal growth was the opportunity to really get into ... heavy stuff.

4.1.6   Participant G6: Male

The expectation I had was that there will be a group of students coming together sharing their processes ... and each of the participants would be encouraged to share their individual processes.

Overall the experience was very good ... there were times when I was dissatisfied but overall the experience was good.

I felt some of the facilitators were not up to par ... a lot of facilitators hadn't been seen to themselves.

Another thing I found dissatisfying was that some of the group members I felt didn't participate fully. I thought that was disappointing because as counsellors we want our clients to share but I thought as participants of a personal growth group if we are not willing to share some of our pain and some of our processes ... I thought there was a lot of holding back.

But I think highly of the personal growth processes of the University ... generally I have a very good – yeah generally I am very happy with – it was just specific things that came to mind ... generally it was a good learning experience.

I think we need to share openly ourselves. I think it is important for me to be open, transparent with my processes so that I don't project onto my clients and this was an ideal situation for me where I could look at my process hopefully in a very trusting, caring and supportive environment, so I was willing to share ... I also accepted that, look ... this is where they are at. I did not pursue the expectation and accepted students and facilitators as to where they were.

I have definitely personally changed ... I remember one particular facilitator asked me ... "What are you doing?" And I actually was able to look at my process and instead of reacting I was able to make a choice and say, "Yeah hang on, maybe this is not

appropriate" – or maybe this is a throwback and I had to look at that process. I looked at it and was able to change it … and this happened time and time again where one of my processes was right into the open, but I didn't see it … couldn't see it. They saw it, the group saw it, got it into my consciousness and I reviewed it and said, "Do I need to use it?... no, I am not happy with it … do I need to change it?" … so yeah, for sure I have changed because of the small group process at this Uni.

I know myself a lot better … I am less reactive … I am a lot more empathic with my clients. I think more than anything I am more aware of my own processes.

That would be the biggest gift that I have been given, so that I am aware of from where I am coming.

This has transferred into my work as a counsellor. What I am able to do now is to be more of a counsellor/facilitator … I am able to be a lot more accepting. This was borne out by my supervisors, my managers, who acknowledge that in me … that I had a good understanding with my clients. I am more empathic.

I came here as a reasonable "know it all person" and I was challenged about it and say … "hang on, are you being the wise man or are you being the counsellor?" And I have to look at that so instead of being instructional, I was more inviting the client to come out and I found that as a very good counselling role process rather than instructing my client and eliciting and asking questions to bring them out. So that was very, very, clear … it was the right shift in me.

In personal growth I got in touch with some of my anger and some of my pain. Now when my clients have that, I don't react to that, and I know that for a fact because I used to react before, but after my three years here I didn't. So I am very, very clear that through my personal growth group process here that I was able to hang in there with men who have anger … definitely a change for sure.

In the small group, I had a facilitator who allowed me to show my anger … and he just accepted my anger. I learned right … that I can just allow someone to have anger fully, it

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doesn't have to go to aggression … I don't have to wear it … it just is. So simply from the modelling of the facilitator that I learned that if I stay with my anger … or if I allow the other person to stay with their anger, it is not a problem and that was a very big lesson for me.

So these days if a client gets angry, I can just stay with them, I am not enmeshed in it. I am very clear where the boundary is … that is your anger, it is not mine, and I leave it.

I go out there into the industry and I see the different ways of how the Notre Dame students have been accepted. I can see the big difference is our personal growth that we do, and the (mature) *age of our students. I see a lot of young students who are very academically aware but do not have any personal understanding and who are not aware of their processes … they look at the client in a very academic way and the therapeutic relationship doesn't exist or is minimal, and from all my research the therapy relationship is one of the important ones.*

I think that personal awareness is very important as counsellors. So what it (the group experience) *has done is that it has allowed me to walk a lot further … with a person's issue and I am still not enmeshed in it.*

4.1.7   Participant G7: Male

I knew it would be sort of ... looking at your own personal life ... to what extent I had no idea. If I had known that it would be so deep into my personal life, I think I would have been very nervous coming into it.

The experience was very positive ... I really appreciated the whole sequence of years and how it went.

I experienced the group positively ... the people within the groups I got to know them really well. I really enjoyed it from that perspective.

I also enjoyed it to see that I was not the only one with nasty issues in my life ... and be able to share experiences ... and for other people to just listen ... I found it a privilege to be in a group like that.

My personal issues came out ... mainly because I realised very quickly that I was somewhat of a judgemental character. Through three years I grew to understand how strongly judgemental I was ... from that perspective I think I have come out far better for it.

As a result of the personal growth group, I really had to learn to not fall into the trap (of judging others) *and I believe I am now very capable of keeping the issue separate from the person, which I am very thankful for and in that sense personal growth has done me a world of good.*

Whenever someone in the group was talking about sexual abuse I sort of clammed up and was uptight. I went silent.

The facilitators honed in on my silence ... I ended up breaking down in the group ... pretty heavily ... if I knew I was going to go through that ... I don't think I would have even done this course, to be quite honest.

The group came together for me at that time and later on and then throughout the three

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years and I was able to be part of the group to help others as well and support others.

I am thankful it (support) *was there because I don't even know if I could have survived ... it was a very strong time ... a very hard time for me.*

I started to see someone from outside to get through it.

It has made me aware ... it has probably made me fully aware.

Personal growth has done that for me in a few things. It has made me aware of what my capabilities are, what I should try and avoid until I have dealt with it fully ... it taught me to realise you have limitations and don't try and do everything. Personal growth has taught me a great deal in that.

Yeah, I have changed ... ask anyone who knows me outside the university and they will say I have changed.

It took me a good couple of weeks to think about every person in the group ... and see if I could trust ... before I could say something. I mean the trust was huge ... I think in a group like that you do have to trust ... you have to make sure the group can keep everything in confidence and I'm happy to say we did.

The trust issue and the support was so vital.

The facilitators challenged me and they did it very effectively.

To realise that it is okay to be able to open up for the first time in 30 or 35 years and the challenge was to jump that hurdle ... it was to be able to move forward ... do I want to suffer short-term to gain long-term ... I really had to weigh it all up. It was a huge jump for me.

As a person it (the group experience) *has made me realise that I am also vulnerable ... what it has made me do is realise that hey, I am not that strong and I think thankfully within the group they made me realise that by my actions and admitting I have a problem and there was an issue ... they* (group members) *suddenly became more confident in me ... yeah, I*

wasn't headed any more in a sense ... I was so much more mellow ... people were more comfortable with me.

I have now realised that I have to look after myself. I have to be very careful how I work.

It has made me just, just change. It is hard to describe.

Personal growth has made me more self-aware of my vulnerabilities ... personal growth has done that for me.

The change has impacted greatly on my work with clients ... I can now feel for people ... if people are suffering I can feel that pain they are suffering.

Empathy ... yeah ... and that was something I didn't have before ... now I am feeling and travelling the journey with them which I was never doing before, and this is probably the reason why people are now seeing me a little differently, or quite a bit differently.

It was just such a worthwhile experience ... I would love to have seen more emphasis based on the need for all individuals to take part in the group.

When you have three or four people just sit back and not want to be a part of it, I think that is a real sad thing ... it made me angry ... in a growth group like this we all learn from each other.

All that I will really say is that without personal growth group, I believe that the course is not complete ... I really loved it ... really appreciative of it.

It would have been nice if we were given a bit of understanding what personal growth is about before you enter into it ... to realise – okay this is not counselling, this is growth, this is about working together and learning to understand each other.

4.1.8   Participant G8: Male

I was very lucky because I didn't have any expectations. I just didn't know what the whole

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thing was about. There was something of self-discovery and quite an interesting experience ... a new awareness ... a new feeling ... almost like rediscovering of myself.

My experience was tremendous ... I knew it was a safe environment ... so if I came up with something that was triggered in me, I knew it would be tolerated.

I came in with an open mind and did not know what to expect, then slowly I was able to identify that actually it is about me. There was a tremendous realisation how much growth actually I had experienced. I was able to reflect on myself through the group ... I could see tremendous growth ... there was tremendous change ... I have completely changed.

Feedback was how I came to understand what was going on ... feedback was invaluable ... I was receiving feedback ... and I had to give feedback to others.

I had an issue ... a reaction when people were asking me the same question (Where do you come from?) *Which I took as a personal attack. And one day I stopped ... I actually had come to the conclusion that it's okay. It's okay ... I can actually handle this. Participation in the personal growth group was absolutely responsible for the change ... I realised that it is up to me ... the group helped me to realise that. There was an increased level of self-awareness. Without the awareness we cannot make conscious choices. Personal growth group was a major part I would say of this self-awareness.*

I found the feedback extremely valuable ... the challenge from the group was at first perhaps difficult, but later it was very welcome ... I want to know your honest feedback.

From my understanding of the group, this unit was absolutely invaluable; invaluable for me as a future counsellor.

I believe that no effective counsellor can be employed by any institution without having done these units ... it is because I know the change that has taken place (in me).

I know I would be less effective ... because I would not be aware.

I work in the field and am exposed to people from different degrees ... if only they had an

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> *opportunity to reflect a little more on themselves, then they would be more effective for their clients … so personal growth is absolutely essential.*

> *Everything that happened to me, good or bad, I found invaluable … I cannot speak highly enough about this … I am amazed.*

4.2 Facilitator responses

Two group facilitators were interviewed in an attempt to understand their observations of the participants as they engaged with the personal growth group. These facilitators were present for all of the group sessions with a particular group. They witnessed the activities within the groups and facilitated both the group itself and also the cognitive processing that occurred afterwards. The facilitators were asked similar questions to the group participants, as follows:

- What in your view were the expectations that students had as they engaged with personal development training in the first instance?

- What do you believe the experience was like for them?

- Would you say students changed over time?

- If so, how did you observe this?

- What would you say was the greatest influence in terms of this change?

- What in your view might have happened to make it more worthwhile for participants?

- Can you describe things that happened in the group that you would have preferred not to have happened?

- What else would you like to say about this topic?

4.2.1 Group Facilitator F1:

I believe that students have an expectation that the personal growth group provides a sense of safety … where they can explore their own awareness process.

They are held in support on the one hand and challenged so to speak with the other.

They feel respected, honoured and not pushed over the edge.

I believe the students change over time because they have a sense of safety … that they can trust the facilitator. I don't think that they have a precise understanding in the beginning of what it is all about, so it is really up to us to clarify in the very beginning what it is, and what it is not, so that people don't have false expectations.

And it is definitely not therapy. So we have to make this clear.

The first prerequisite of change is awareness … of their own internal processes and with that awareness they have choices. They take the utmost responsibility for their own process.

The greatest influence comes from the group facilitator … modelling behaviour in a non-threatening way … students will come along because they feel safe and they see the facilitator can be challenging … and this will increase the safety … and students feel more encouraged to express themselves. It is vital that we as facilitators know what we are doing.

The group dynamics also provide a challenge in itself. If people get moved by experience and gain insight and other participants witness this, then that can trigger some personal

insight and that can set up a dynamic that we can work with as a group.

Personal awareness, an ability to engage in the process and to reflect; these are what I would expect to see when I finish with them at the end of the year.

As future counsellors we have a need to do our homework. This means we need to do our internal work and we need to be fully aware of our own issues.

4.2.2   Group Facilitator F2:

There appeared to be an expectation that it (the group experience) *was going to be very challenging … tinged with excitement … generally positive.*

Much anxiety because they didn't know what it meant … and they didn't know what the rules were.

I would use the words; tense, difficult at times, challenging, exciting, bonding and fruitful.

There are people who don't benefit as much, the minority I would say, and there are people who get heaps out of it … healthily expecting that they would be challenged.

But of course change is always a fearful prospect … the ones who seemed to cope with the intensity of the threat were more resourced … but the average participant would be excited and stimulated by the intensity of that experience.

The initial function for all group members is to sample the water – "Is this a safe place for me to allow vulnerability and allow myself to trust in you?"

Vulnerability I would observe as an ability to show aspects of the self that are at risk of being challenged or criticised by others … and certainly the person would tend to criticise themselves … a tentativeness and a guardedness about producing such aspects … that was almost palpable … A caution seen in body language or tone of voice.

I have been nothing but astonished at the change I have seen in the course of a year and

the shift in the bulk of them through that experience has mostly been on a weekly basis and quite remarkable.

The group has played a huge part in this shift … the enhanced self-knowledge seems to empower them. They understand themselves more … with that understanding they can choose a full repertoire of their failures … they can support and protect themselves … so self-knowledge, and judgement about a lot of their own functioning.

This comes from feedback … being in a reflective space … they report they are understanding themselves so much more from what they have processed.

The other way seems to be in the observing of change in others … that can have a powerful impact.

Definitely the biggest risk for them is rejection by group members … that they will be judged as unimportant … liable to be shamed and excluded by the group.

The compulsory nature of the unit is also challenging for them … although it is quite rare that someone gets to me and says "I really wish I didn't have to do that".

The opportunity to bond with other people in the group is very powerful … often report their growing sense of closeness and understanding of others … less threatened.

The group bonding, learning about self-awareness and an environment that held an intention of support of one another … they valued the good intentions of the group.

I am so impressed with how empowered the students are going through this experience and the shifts they report generally having made and that I observed actually they have made.

4.3   Agency supervisor responses

Two other people were interviewed regarding the students who were participants in these personal growth groups. These were supervisors from counselling agencies where these students had been on placement. The agency supervisors had therefore observed these students (in their final semester) following five semesters, or circa 160 hours, of personal growth.

These supervisors were both female and were aged between 50 and 60 years. One has a background in social work and is an experienced counsellor in the area of families, as well as drug and alcohol work. The other graduated from The University of Notre Dame Australia seven years previously and therefore had experienced the personal development group herself over her three years of undergraduate training. These agency supervisors were selected to participate in this study because of their experience of the graduates while in attendance at their agency. Their perceptions of the counselling students were thought to be of value and worthy of description.

These supervisors were asked questions as follows:

- How do you experience the students on placement at your agency from The University of Notre Dame Australia?

- What do you notice, if anything, that is different about these students compared to other students of counselling on placement at your agency?

- Why do you believe this to be the case?

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- What experience are these students from Notre Dame exposed to while on placement?

- Overall, how do these students cope with this exposure?

- What else would you like to say to me about these students and how you find them?

4.3.1 Supervisor S1:

They have a level of awareness that is not always seen and this is evident when we do the experiential training … a level of awareness that is a little more advanced.
They are more willing to throw themselves in and get right into it.
They have an ability to stay with deep emotional issues … this is incredibly important.
They have done their own work … they seem to be able to sit with others because they have done their own work. This is an element that comes through very strongly.
It certainly makes them stand apart. There is definitely a difference … I think it is about their own awareness and their ability to separate what belongs to them and what belongs to the client.
I think they grow faster. There seems to be a much steeper growth in them than perhaps other students in the way they operate within themselves.
They are very open in talking about themselves … they have a very good awareness of their process.

4.3.2 Supervisor S2:

I think primarily they have a greater awareness in the main compared to other universities in terms of personal growth and development. That seems to be the focus of the students who come from Notre Dame.

In conversations they understand what I am talking about when I talk in terms of issues on personal development needs in relation to relationships ... they are quick to pick up on these issues.

They are open to talking about their issues and open to ongoing challenges on that process ... and they seem well on the way to that ongoing process of self-awareness.

It can be quite a challenging process for them to look at their dark sides and their vulnerable bits if you like.

There are individual differences ... with the Notre Dame students, there seems to be a particular emphasis on self-awareness and the clinical process if you like.

With some of the other students, they would not be so aware in that area. They (other students) *tend to be more aware of a clinical health model ... more focus on theory, research ... more of an analytical approach to their work ... that is the primary difference I would say.*

Students from Notre Dame cope very well ... I think they enjoy it ... the group work they have done ... in terms of self-awareness and self-responsibility in their professional practice – they can see how relevant it is in terms of the work that we do.

There is absolutely a link between the personal growth that they do and their ability to be part of the group work here.

4.4 Generation of themes, sub-themes and interpretation

This is a summary of significant themes emerging from the transcribed interviews as interpreted by the researcher. This procedure for categorisation follows that which is outlined by Smith (2008). Many themes overlap or are stated by more than one participant, and, in some cases, by all participants. These themes have been further reduced in number in the next stage of the analysis, which is presented in section 4.5

4.4.1 Initial list of themes: All graduates

Something unknown	Challenging
Unsettling to observe	I started to disclose
Difficult yet wonderful	Anxiety ridden
Much learning	Less risky
Rewarding	Got a bit angry
Self-revealing	Self-accepting
A deepening experience	Stepping over my boundaries
Experiencing like a dawning	Self-trusting
Beyond what was comfortable	Facilitators didn't step in
Our responses is the key	Risking being exposed

I feel personally changed	Very painful and damaging
Feeling unsure	Pretty scary for me
More self-aware	Definitely changed
Bit of a catastrophe	Facilitator is important
Things became obvious to me	Huge self-knowledge
To find out about myself	Greater sense of freedom
I became more self-knowledgeable	Understood my own triggers
Looking into myself	Felt a shift happen
Aware of boundaries	Taught me about awareness
Understanding myself	I understand my process
Dangerous emotions	Out of pain there was growth
Gained greater self-awareness	My empathy has come from being confronted
A transformation for me	Feedback very valuable
I felt supported	Support
To express what I was feeling	So much uncovered for me

Absolutely a positive experience	An encouraging experience
I have changed	Very supportive
A challenge to confront people	I have personally changed
A fear of not being okay	Embarrassed
A fear of not being understood	Helps me to be empathic
Learning to be safe within myself	Helped feed my compassion
I felt anger	Reflecting on self
I got the opportunity to express	Receiving feedback
An opportunity where I could grow	Like going to counselling
Huge growth	A rich resource
I got angry	I valued the experience
Incredibly emotional	The most profound experience of my life
Like a renewal	It was huge
Like self-awareness	I felt vulnerable
The challenge came	Inadequate
So vulnerable	Empty

Challenge to get stronger	I know myself better
Self-disclosure	Less reactive
Listen and give space	More empathic
A big challenge	More aware
Personal growth was the opportunity	Transferred into my work
To get into heavy stuff	More accepting
Encouraged to share	I was challenged
Experience was good	The right shift for me
Disappointed at people holding back	In touch with my anger
A good learning experience	Definitely a change for sure
Trusting	A big lesson for me
Caring	I am not enmeshed
Supportive	Notre Dame students accepted
Aware of processes	I have personally changed
Personal awareness	Trust was huge
Very positive	Support was vital
Share experiences	Facilitators challenged me
Not the only one with issues	It was a huge jump for me

Personal issues came out	So vulnerable
I am more mellow	Worthwhile experience
Impacted on my work with clients	People who sit back made me angry
I can feel their pain	Loved it
Trust issue was vital	Really appreciative of it
Support was vital	A new awareness
Just change	A new feeling
Like rediscovering myself	Increased level of self-awareness
A safe environment	Feedback was invaluable
I was tolerated	Challenge difficult but welcome
Tremendous growth	Personal growth is essential
I have completely changed	I am amazed

4.4.2   Initial list of themes: Facilitators

A sense of safety	Tinged with excitement
Explore awareness	Generally positive
Support	Tense
Respect	Exciting
Not pushed	Bonding

Trust the facilitator	Fruitful
Not therapy	Difficult at times
Change	Fearful
Influence of group facilitator	A safe place
Group dynamics a challenge	Change
Modelling behaviour	Allow vulnerability
Vital facilitators know what they are doing	Trust
Reflect	Challenged or criticised by others
Personal awareness	A risk
Fully aware of issues	Stimulated
Challenging	A risk of rejection
Anxiety	Astonished by the shift

4.4.3   Initial list of themes: Agency supervisors

A level of self-awareness	Stand apart
Quick to pick up	Vulnerable bits
More advanced	Definitely a difference
Open to talking	They understand personal development

	needs
More willing to get into it	Separate what belongs to them
Well on the way to self-awareness	Other students not so aware
Ability to stay with emotional issues	A very good awareness
Self responsibility	Other students more theoretical – more analytic
They have done their work	Much deeper growth compared to other students
Cope very well	Greater awareness
Good awareness of their process	Absolutely a link to personal growth
Challenging process	

4.5   Cluster of ordinate themes

The next stage of the analysis was to produce a table of the themes in a cluster that captured most strongly the respondents' perceptions of their experience. The clusters themselves have been given a name and these represent the ordinate themes. Each ordinate theme has been allocated an identifier to help the organisation of the analysis. The identifier allows immediate access to the point in the data where the narrative can be subsequently found by giving page numbers and lines. It is therefore possible to read and see the in-depth meaning

as described by each participant as they were interviewed. An example of an identifier is G1 for Graduate number one and 1.5 (page one, line five). This represents the researcher's interpretation of what each interviewee actually said.

The following ordinate themes were identified and will be discussed in the next section:

Self-awareness	Change
Vulnerabilities	Emotional expression
Support	Self-disclosure
Feedback	Challenges
Risks	Safety
Facilitators	Link to practice

The final section of this study supports the findings with a narrative account so that the reader is able to link the meanings to each transcribed interview and also to the overall collection of responses from the total number of subjects interviewed. It is in this manner that a true flavour of the experience and personal significance can be gleaned. It is not possible, nor desirable, to match each respondent to the next. It is important to recognise that although there are many similarities, the response of each participant to the small group is unique, due to individual personalities and subsequent different perceptions.

Therefore, this section is concerned with moving from the final identified themes to a narrative account where final statements are made outlining meanings for the individual participants regarding their experience. Here, the analysis becomes expansive, as themes are explained and illustrated. The narrative form is interspersed with verbatim extracts from the transcripts to support the case. In this stage, great care must be taken to distinguish between what the participant actually said and the researcher's interpretation of it. The steps taken to ensure the "epoche" or bracketing included self-reflection to try to establish what was taking place in the research process. Notes were taken following each interview and were consulted when reading each transcribed interview. The researcher continually asked the question of himself "What am I taking for granted here?" The notes also recorded the non-verbal aspects of the interview, including body gestures, tone of voice, facial expression and the perceived emotional tone of the interviewee.

4.5.1   Theme 1: Self-awareness

This was a dominant theme throughout the interviews and reference was made to self-awareness by all participants. This includes graduates, facilitators and agency supervisors, suggesting that many graduates seem to have had a sharp learning curve in terms of who they are. The following extracts from the transcripts explain the individual experiences of the graduates, while the facilitator and supervisor comments appear to support the generally held view of increased self-awareness within the small group experience.

The first participant described her experience as follows:

> *It was a deepening experience for me. I feel more self-aware, more aware of my own stuff. Things I knew but didn't think of, became obvious to me. I became*

aware of why I would say certain things and became more self-knowledgeable. (G1: 102.12)

This participant described her experience of gaining an increased awareness thus:

> *The experience was like a dawning … the dynamic of a dawning, and not just my own stuff. My responses are the key.* (G1: 103.11)

The notion of self-awareness was picked up further by the next participant, who said:

> *I knew it was to find out about myself or to look into myself. I gained greater self-awareness and huge self-knowledge from personal growth. I can now understand my own process. I have been asked at the agency where I work where I get my self-awareness. It* (personal growth) *taught me about awareness.* (G2: 103.15)

The theme continues with the next participant, who declared that so much was uncovered for her:

> *There was huge growth.* (G3: 106.2)

The next participant referred to reflecting on oneself and the importance of it for her:

> *Reflecting on self in the personal growth group was the core of the course.* (G4: 107.6)

The significance of the small group experience was described by the next participant in the following manner:

> *It was the most profound experience of my life. It was like a renewal. I started to own my feelings. It was just like self-awareness.* (G5: 107.13)

In the same vein, the next participant also referred to self-knowledge or self-awareness:

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I know myself better. I think more than anything I am more aware of my own process. (G6: 110.15)

The next participant linked self-awareness to specific areas like strengths and weaknesses:

It has made me aware, probably fully aware. It has made me aware of what my capabilities are and made me more self-aware of my vulnerabilities. (G7: 113.17)

The final graduate interviewed also referred to the theme of self-awareness:

There was something of self-discovery and quite an interesting experience. A new awareness, a new feeling, almost like re-discovering myself. Personal growth was a major part of this self-awareness. (G8: 115.17)

The group facilitators also referred to the theme of self-awareness as follows:

Personal growth provides an opportunity where they can explore their own awareness process. The first prerequisite of change is awareness. An awareness of their own internal processes, and with that awareness they have choices. As future counsellors we need to be fully aware of our own issues. (F1: 117.19)

The second facilitator referred to self-understanding:

They understand themselves more. So they have self-knowledge and judgement about a lot of their own functioning. They report they are understanding themselves so much more from what they have processed. (F2: 120.7)

The agency supervisors also focussed on self-awareness, as follows:

They have a level of self-awareness that is not always seen (in other students). *They have a level of awareness that is a little more advanced. They have a very good awareness of their process.* (S1: 122.5)

The other supervisor was even more explicit in identifying differences between the students who were exposed to personal growth and those others who were not. She said:

> *I think primarily they have a greater awareness in the main compared to other universities in terms of personal growth and development. They seem well on their way to that ongoing process of self-awareness. Students from Notre Dame cope very well in terms of self-awareness and self-responsibility in their professional practice.* (S2: 123.1)

4.5.2 Theme 2: Change

The participants seemed to be quite emphatic with regard to the change brought about by their small group experience, and were specific as to what happened for them:

> *I have personally changed. I am more aware of my own stuff. I am more self-accepting and self-trusting. It is almost like a transformation has taken place for me. I feel less risky and more revealing.* (G1: 103.3)

> *I have most definitely changed. I have a greater sense of freedom and I understand my own triggers. I can now sit with clients and understand the process that is going on inside my head as well.* (G2: 104.6)

> *I have changed due to personal growth. I learned how to accept and to understand. I also learned how to be safe within myself.* (G3: 105.8)

> *I have personally changed. It was an opportunity to see the world a dozen other ways. I learned how other people experience me. This is very valuable.* (G4: 106.12)

> *I have definitely personally changed. I am less reactive. I am more empathic with my clients. I am more accepting. Instead of being instructional, I am more inviting to the client to come out. It was the right shift for me, and definitely a change for sure.* (G6: 110.5)

> *Yeah I have changed. Ask anyone who knows me outside the university and they will say I have changed. I am much more mellow. I am more self-aware of my vulnerabilities. The change has impacted greatly on my work with clients. I can feel that pain they are suffering. Empathy, yeah, and that was something I didn't have before.* (G7: 114.22)

One of the facilitators also commented on the change experienced by graduates:

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I am nothing but astonished at the change I have seen in the bulk of them. The shift has been quite remarkable. The group has played a huge part in this shift. They can support and protect themselves. They are empowered. (F2: 120.3)

4.5.3   Theme 3: Vulnerabilities

This theme refers to the statements regarding discomfort felt by participants in the personal growth group.

It was very painful and damaging for me. People were stepping over my boundaries. In first year I felt like a child. (G2: 103.3)

I had a fear of not being able to express myself and not being understood. (G3: 105.13)

I felt embarrassed in front of people although it was reassuring for me to learn that it is okay to be embarrassed. Nothing terrible happened and it is not the end of the world. It gives me courage to be in this kind of place again. (G4: 106.16)

I felt vulnerable, inadequate and empty. When I did expose what I felt I would feel so vulnerable, like a shaky feeling inside. It was like a feeling of nerves. (G5: 108.11)

I also enjoyed it to see that I was not the only one with nasty issues in my life. Whenever someone was talking about sexual abuse I sort of clammed up and was uptight. I ended up breaking down quite heavily. If I knew I was going to go through that I don't think I would have done this course to be quite honest. Personal growth has made me aware of my vulnerabilities. (G7: 113.8)

An observation made by one of the facilitators presents a good picture of the vulnerability experienced by members of the group:

There was much anxiety because they didn't know what it meant. I would use the words difficult at times, and challenging. They would ask the question, "Is this a safe place for me to allow my vulnerability and to allow myself to trust in you? Can I show aspects of myself that are at risk of being challenged or criticised by others?" I see a tentativeness and a guardedness in them about producing such aspects of themselves. I would see a caution in body language or tone of voice. Definitely, the biggest risk for them is rejection by group members. They were aware that they could be shamed and excluded from the group. (F2: 119.3)

4.5.4 Theme 4: Emotional experience

This theme refers to the manner and extent to which the participants experienced emotional arousal as part of their experience in the personal growth group. This is what the participants said about this:

I experienced dangerous emotions at times. I had to go to a place that I am not comfortable with. I was risking being exposed and that was pretty scary for me. I was scared that things might get out of control. (G1: 103.1)

While I gained greater self-awareness in second year, it was bedlam for me. It got my shackles up and I got a bit angry at being backed into a corner. The group members kept stepping over my boundaries and the facilitators didn't step in at all. I don't think the facilitator knew what to do. She got very, very angry when I told her I thought she was voyeuristic. (G2: 103.17)

The group taught me to express myself and what I was feeling. I had this fear of not being able to express myself and not be understood. When I felt anger and resentment, I was given the opportunity to express these within the group. The fear of affecting someone else is where my challenge comes from. (G3: 105.13)

I had always sort of felt that I could feel everyone else's issues of pain and feelings, but I could never feel my own. In the group I got cross and angry. I

became incredibly emotional and wondered what she had touched here. It was the most profound experience because of the feeling stuff. (G5: 107.15)

In personal growth I got in touch with some of my anger and some of my pain. Now I don't react to that and I hang in there with men who have anger. In the small group I had a facilitator who allowed me to show my anger and he just accepted it. So these days, if a client gets angry, I can just stay with them. (G6: 111.6)

I ended up breaking down quite heavily in the group. I was uptight and silent. It also made me sad and angry when I saw three or four people just sit back and not want to be a part of it. I really loved the personal growth group and am really appreciative of it. (G7: 113.9)

One of the facilitators commented:

There was much anxiety to begin with because they didn't know the rules. Change is always a fearful prospect and the ones who seemed to cope with the intensity of the threat were the more resourced. The average participant would be excited and stimulated by the intensity of that experience. (F2: 119.7)

The agency supervisors also commented on emotional issues concerning the graduates and specifically referred to "their ability to stay with deep emotional issues, which is incredibly important" (S1: 122.9). In the same vein, the other supervisor stated:

They are open to talking about their issues and looking at their dark sides and their vulnerable bits if you like. (S2: 123.6)

4.5.5   Theme 5: Support

Support within the small group is emphasised by Vernelle (1994) as central to outcomes within personal development groups. As in counselling relationships, if adequate support

and empathic acceptance are present, challenge can be effective in helping people change their view of themselves or others. This is what the participants said about support:

> *I felt supported and it was everything I could have wanted. There was support and availability. There was an affirmation and encouragement of myself in the process. I felt safe in the group. It helped me not to retreat from what the group had to offer.* (G4: 106.7)

> *I enjoyed that other people would just listen. I found it a privilege to be in a group like that. The group came together for me at that time and then throughout the three years and I was able to be a part of the group to help others. I am thankful that the support was there because I don't know if I could have even survived. It was a very hard time for me. It took me a good couple of weeks to think about every person in the group and see if I could trust* (them)*. I mean the trust and the support was so vital.* (G7: 113.12)

One of the facilitators commented that the participants were held in support:

> *They feel respected, honoured, and not pushed over the edge. I believe students change when they can trust the facilitator.* (F1: 118.1)

The other facilitator mentioned bonding and said that she could see the participants were able to support and protect themselves:

> *The opportunity to bond with other people in the group was powerful. They would often report their growing sense of closeness and felt less threatened. The group bonding created an environment that held an intention of support of one another. They valued the good intentions of the group.* (F2: 120.8)

4.5.6 Theme 6: Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is a critical transaction within the personal growth group activity. It is a way for group participants to develop an openness through sharing often quite personal issues with others. It is closely linked to feedback, which will be described in the next section. This is what participants said about self-disclosure:

> *There was much learning for me. It began when I started to disclose a little. I felt more free to say that I am unsure.* (G1: 103.7)

> *I learned to share myself more when I chose to do it rather than be triggered into it.* (G2: 104.12)

> *I got to be human, to be me, and I got to express myself. I got the opportunity to express these emotions in the group.* (G3: 105.2)

> *The personal growth group allowed me to be heard and no one else was allowed to speak, so it gave me the floor. It is just saying that this is who I am and I do not have to ask someone else's opinion about how I ought to feel or see. I was just to be heard and that was so important. People responded to my openness. I said what it was like for me. It was like self-disclosure. So I began to talk about myself.* (G6: 108.1)

> *It took me a couple of weeks before I could say something. The challenge for me was to realise that it is okay to be able to open up for the first time in 30 or 35 years.* (G7: 114.2)

The supervisors commented on the participants' willingness and ability to engage in self-disclosure:

> *They are more willing to throw themselves in and get right into it. They are very open to talking about themselves.* (S1: 122.8)

They are open to talking about their issues and open to ongoing challenges on that process. (S2: 123.7)

However, there was a disappointment expressed at the absence of self-disclosure by several of the participants:

I would have liked the facilitators to challenge those who were not working in the group. (G2: 104.16)

Another thing I found dissatisfying was that some of the group members I felt didn't participate fully. There was a lot of holding back. (G6: 109.11)

I would love to have seen more emphasis based on the need for all individuals to take part in the group. I think that is a real sad thing. (G7: 115.7)

4.5.7   Theme 7: Feedback

Feedback is the response that people receive when they self-disclose within a small group setting. It is an opportunity to receive information about themselves that is previously unknown to them, or to receive some clarity regarding an issue they have disclosed. It is a critical aspect of personal development for counsellor trainees, in that they are always learning about themselves. This is what the participants said about feedback in their personal growth group experience:

I learned how other people might experience me. It is rare and very valuable to have that kind of feedback. I learned from everyone in the group. Reflecting on self and others and receiving feedback. (G4: 106.15)

I was given the floor and silence prevailed. I began to talk about myself and then people responded to my openness within the group. (G5: 108.15)

This happened time and time again where one of my processes was right into the open, but I didn't see it. The group saw it and then I reviewed it. (G6: 110.9)

I was able to reflect on myself through the group. The feedback was invaluable. Feedback was how I came to understand what was going on, and I had to give feedback to others also. It was perhaps difficult at first but later it was very welcome. I would say I wanted to know the honest feedback from the group. (G8: 116.3)

The impact of feedback was also apparent to the facilitators, as evidenced by this comment:

They understand themselves more and they know more about a lot of their functioning. This comes from feedback they receive and they report that they are understanding themselves so much more from what they have processed. (F2: 120.7)

4.5.8 Theme 8: Challenges

This theme is a very important one, in that it is through challenge that a participant is likely to become aware of a blind spot or gain understanding and/or clarity regarding an aspect of themselves. Challenge within a counselling context is really where the work in counselling is done. Egan (1998) suggests that the individual unchallenged will drift towards the extremes. It is therefore sometimes a bit like being pulled up by the bootstraps and a little confronting. Challenge should always be offered with respect (Egan, 1998) and we should see challenge as a true act of caring. Egan further suggests that we ought to challenge only those we care about. Being a member of a group can be challenging, even if this is by observing other members doing their work. In the main, the participants appeared to value being a participant in the group and this is what they said:

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It was challenging, anxiety ridden and rewarding for me. I found it difficult yet wonderful. I was scared that things might get out of control and witnessing aggression unnerved me. I found it unsettling to observe this. (G1: 103.5)

People would challenge me and I distinctly felt a shift happen. (G2: 104.11)

To listen to someone else and their experience and manage that within myself helped me accept my wounds and my pain. The biggest challenge for me though was to confront people. To be challenged myself was really positive because it allowed me to grow. (G3: 105.3)

I was challenged not to set limits for myself and not to retreat from what the group had to offer. (G4: 106.8)

When I did expose what I felt, I would feel so vulnerable and this was my challenge to actually get stronger. (G5: 108.12)

I came here as a reasonably "know it all person" and I was challenged about it. I was asked if I was being the wise man or a counsellor. This caused the right shift for me. (G6: 111.1)

The facilitators challenged me and they did it very effectively. The challenge was to jump the hurdle and it was a huge jump for me. (G7: 114.6)

The challenge from the group was at first perhaps very difficult, but later it was very welcome. (G8: 116.15)

The facilitators seemed to believe that challenging was a very important aspect of personal growth for those taking part in the group:

They are held in support on the one hand and challenged so to speak on the other. They see the facilitator can be challenging and they feel more encouraged to express themselves. The group dynamics also provide a challenge in itself. People get moved and others gain insight and this can trigger some personal insight that we can work with as a group. (F1: 118.1)

I would use the word challenging. There are people who get heaps out of it as they are healthily expecting to be challenged. I would observe an ability to show aspects of the self that are at risk of being challenged or criticised by others. The compulsory nature of the unit is also challenging for them. It is rare though that someone comes to me and says that they didn't really want to do that. (F2: 119.4)

One of the agency supervisors said of the graduates:

They are open to talking about their issues and open to ongoing challenges on that process. It can be quite a challenging process for them to look at their dark side. (S2: 123.7)

4.5.9 Theme 9: Risks

When participating in a group such as a personal growth group, there are many individuals and all of them are different. Some will be more sensitive than others. Some will express themselves more easily than others. Some members will consider self-disclosure as a great risk in the group. One of the graduates made the following comment about risks within the group:

I was risking being exposed within the group and this was pretty scary for me, but I feel less risky now and more self-revealing. (G1: 103.4)

The comments by this facilitator seem to sum up the risk participants take as they express themselves and disclose in the group:

They (participants) *had an ability to show aspects of the self that are at risk of being challenged or criticised by others. The biggest risk definitely for them is being rejected by group members, that they will be judged as unimportant. They fear being shamed and excluded by the group.* (F1: 119.14)

4.5.10 Theme 10: Safety and trust

Many participants find the small group experience unsafe to begin with and consider it to be strongly linked to comfort, trust and risk. There is often an emotional arousal and a sense of discomfort experienced by group participants as they are challenged with the prospect of sharing intimate aspects of themselves and their lives with others. It is not always experienced pleasantly. In this context, boundaries and confidentiality are paramount. These are the comments of the group participants regarding safety and trust:

It was a deepening experience, and I went beyond what was comfortable for me. I was risking being exposed. (G1: 103.4)

I felt safe in the group. I learned how other people might experience me. It was reassuring for me to learn that it is okay to be embarrassed in front of people. Nothing terrible happened and it is not the end of the world. (G4: 106.13)

I could look at my process in a very trusting, caring, and supportive environment and so I was willing to share. (G6: 110.1)

It took me a good couple of weeks to think about every person in the group and see if I could trust them before I could say something. I mean the trust was huge. I would say the trust issue and the support was vital. (G7: 114.1)

I knew it was a safe environment, so if something was triggered in me I knew it would be tolerated. (G8: 115.20)

Both facilitators commented strongly on issues of trust and safety within the groups, as follows:

> *I believe that students have an expectation that the personal growth group provides a sense of safety where they can explore their own awareness process. They are held in support. They feel respected, honoured and not pushed over the edge. I believe the students change over time because they have a sense of safety and they can trust the facilitator.* (F1: 117.20)

> *The initial function for all group members is to sample the water and ask if this is a safe place for me. They are at risk of being challenged by others. There was a tentativeness and guardedness about producing such aspects of themselves that was almost palpable.* (F2: 119.13).

4.5.11 Theme 11: The facilitators

The role of the facilitator is very important, and is crucial to how participants will respond to membership of the group. There are always individual differences between facilitators in terms of gender, background and training, as well as theoretical orientation and style. Each of these, together with the personality of the facilitator, will have an influence on the individual experience for the participants. Issues of safety, levels of risk, confidentiality and trust are critical and will influence the comfort levels of participation by the members. The importance of the facilitators and their ability to manage the group was commented on by several graduates, as follows:

> *I found it unsettling to observe aggression in the group. I found it very scary. This is why a good facilitator is so important.* (G1: 103.5)

> *I got a bit angry being backed into a corner. They* (group members) *kept poking and stepping over my boundaries and the facilitators didn't step in at all. The*

group was too big and I don't think the facilitator knew what to do. She got very, very angry when I told her I thought she was voyeuristic. (G2: 103.20)

I would also have liked the facilitators to challenge those who were not working in the group. (G2: 104.16)

In year two the facilitator asked me "How did I feel"?. And I thought "I don't like this". I felt vulnerable, inadequate, and empty and wondered what she had touched here. (G5: 107.19)

I felt dissatisfied at times. Overall the experience was very good, but I felt some of the facilitators were not up to par. A lot of facilitators hadn't been there themselves. (G6: 108.10)

I sort of clammed up and was uptight. The facilitators honed in on my silence and I ended up breaking down quite heavily. (G7: 113.7)

The facilitators challenged me and they did it very effectively. It was a huge jump for me. (G7: 114.6)

One facilitator acknowledged the importance of the role of the facilitator, saying:

The greatest influence comes from the group facilitator through modelling behaviour in a non-threatening way. It is important that they can trust the facilitator. (F1: 118.11)

The other facilitator referred to trust, saying that a critical question for participants to ask is:

Is this a safe place for me to allow myself to trust in you (the facilitator)*?* (F2: 119.12)

4.5.12 Theme 12: Link to practice

Counselling is a practice discipline, and high-quality counsellors are in demand all over Australia and indeed the Western world. It is an activity that often involves great pain and distress for the client. It is very important therefore that the training and preparation of these professionals should be thorough and sufficient to provide them with not only the practical skills, but also a level of self-awareness that allows efficient interventions with their clients. Graduates in this study made a link to practice in their responses, although they were not specifically asked a question on that topic. These are their responses:

> *I have had one professional person in the field actually say to me "Where do you get all your awareness from?" It's like, how do you get that depth about yourself?* (G2: 104.17)

> *Sometimes we would touch other people's issues which were so hugely deep and I would think, "Wow – how are you going to get through that in order to help the client?"* (G2: 109.19)

> *I think we need to share openly ourselves so that we do not project on to our clients. I am aware of where I am coming from. This has transferred into my work as a counsellor. What I am able to do now is to be more of a counsellor/facilitator. I am a lot more accepting. This was borne out by my supervisors/managers who acknowledge that in me. I am more empathic. These days if a client gets angry, I can just stay with them. I am not enmeshed.* (G6: 110.17)

> *I go out there into the industry and I see the different ways the students from Notre Dame are accepted. I see a big difference between us and other students. They look at the client in a more academic way and the therapeutic relationship is minimal. The group experience has allowed me to walk a lot further with a person's issue and I am still not enmeshed in it.* (G6: 111.21)

It has made me aware of my capabilities and of what I should try and avoid until I have dealt with it fully. It taught me to realise I have limitations and I should not to try and do everything. (G7: 113.18)

The change has impacted greatly on my work with clients. I can now feel for people if they are suffering. Empathy is something I didn't have before. (G7: 114.21)

I work in the field and am exposed to people from other degrees. If only they had an opportunity to reflect a little more on themselves then they would be more effective for their clients. Personal growth is absolutely essential because I know the change that has taken place in me. I know I would be less effective because I would not be aware. (G8: 117.1)

Both agency supervisors made a strong link between the personal growth experience and the link to practice, as follows:

It certainly makes them stand apart. There is a definite difference. It is about their self-awareness and the ability to separate what belongs to them and what belongs to the client. (S1: 122.13)

Students from other universities would not be so focussed in the area of self-awareness. They tend to be more aware of a clinical health model. They have more focus on theory and research. They have more of an analytic approach to their work. Students from Notre Dame cope very well. In their professional practice, there is absolutely a link between personal growth that they do, and their ability to be a part of the group work here. (S2: 123.13)

This chapter has outlined the central issues as experienced by the participants who took part in personal growth groups as a critical part of their counsellor training at The University of Notre Dame Australia. It represents the very personal disclosures as to what the experience

was like for them. The final chapter which follows discusses in greater detail the ordinate themes identified in this study. It also discusses the implications for counsellor education and training, as well as implications for counselling practice and implications for further research.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the meaning and personal significance of the personal growth experience for a purposefully selected group of recent graduates from the Bachelor of Counselling degree at The University of Notre Dame Australia. The method of collecting data was to record, and then transcribe verbatim, a semi-structured interview with each participant. Participants in this study had graduated within the previous two years and this research was an attempt to understand from their personal statements what meaning this experience held for them. It is therefore a phenomenological study to ascertain depth of meaning and significance for the participants having had this experience.

The challenge for any researcher in using a qualitative methodology is to meet, in so far as is possible, the rigours of scientific inquiry. This study is a non-probabilistic one and the aim is not to refer to how many participants made certain responses or indeed to extrapolate in any way from the data. It is rather about interpretation of what this experience has meant for these participants and to understand this meaning in the context of counsellor education and training. To that end, each participant's responses to the specific questions asked were equally valid when compared to the next. The study is about personal meaning and that is what the data tries to capture.

There are significant questions being asked currently within the emerging profession of counselling regarding the preparation of professional counsellors for practice. This research has offered very valuable insights as to what the experience was like for these eight

graduates. The comments of the group facilitators seem to be very much in agreement with what was generally shared by those interviewed, and both agency supervisors gave a worthwhile account of how they experienced these trainee counsellors while on placement.

5.2   Discussion of ordinate themes

The meta-theme which emerged from this study was that participants believe themselves to have changed very significantly as a result of the personal growth group experience over three years. The research confirmed that for all participants it was, in the end, a positive outcome, although some found the journey difficult, painful and challenging along the way.

It is important to remember that no matter how much group facilitators and participants try to create an atmosphere that encourages expression and is relatively safe, individual, interpersonal and group processes will continue to operate. Johns (1998) describes this as the presence of central human dilemmas, which encompasses:

- wanting to be separate yet belong

- longing for intimacy yet wanting distance

- feeling attraction for some people and antipathy for others

- needing excitement and stimulus to learn, yet fearing risk and feeling caught by anxiety

- wanting to change and grow while being defensive and resisting change

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- having needs yet not wanting to appear vulnerable.

All of these issues were referred to by the participants and acknowledged as part of their experience within the personal growth group. The following are the ordinate themes identified by the participants in this study and are discussed further below:

- Self-awareness
- Change
- Vulnerabilities
- Emotional expression
- Support
- Self-disclosure

- Feedback
- Challenges
- Risks
- Safety
- Facilitators
- Link to practice

Self-awareness was a dominant theme (if not the superordinate one) and was mentioned by graduates, facilitators and agency supervisors alike. Participants seemed to have an expectation that there would be some element of increased self-awareness or self-knowledge. Many of them referred to greater self-understanding of their internal processes. They also described the small group experience as increasing awareness of strengths and vulnerabilities, or in terms of self-discovery or re-discovery. The agency supervisors commented that the students from the program at The University of Notre Dame Australia differed from other students in terms of how much self-awareness they possessed.

Change was also an emphatically stated outcome for almost all participants in this program. It was stated in a similar vein to self-awareness. Graduates said they now understood their own triggers and had learned to accept and understand themselves. Some said they were less reactive and more empathic and mellow. This change was also noticed by one facilitator, who said she was astonished at the shift and described it as quite remarkable. This change was specifically as a result of participation in the personal growth group experience.

Vulnerabilities were seen as important by many participants. They described the discomfort they experienced in the group. Some said they had a fear of being embarrassed, while others said how painful the experience was for them. One participant said that had he known this in advance, he may not have taken part. One facilitator said that the biggest fear students had was rejection by the group and a fear that they might be shamed and excluded from the group. This is a common dynamic within groups, as there is often a great "pull" to conform as the group strives for a method of working. Those who do not conform to the emerging norm are firstly challenged and, if this fails, they are "cut off" and excluded from the group.

Emotional experience was another ordinate theme expressed by participants. They referred to feeling frightened and resentful, as well as angry. Some of the anger was directed at the facilitators, who were observed as not ensuring that all members of the group participated. This was expressed quite strongly by some participants. Others were pleased that when they did experience emotions such as anger and fear, that they could express them.

One of the facilitators suggested that there was much anxiety to begin with because the group members did not know the rules or how they should behave. Agency supervisors said they could observe how these graduates were able to "stay with" deep emotional issues.

Support, as a theme, was stated as a very positive experience by some participants, as well as the facilitators. Vernelle (1994) suggests that if adequate support and empathic acceptance are present, challenge can be effective in helping people change their views of themselves and others. Some graduates said they felt supported when others listened, and one facilitator said that participants felt respected, honoured and not pushed over the edge when they were "held" in support. The other facilitator referred to bonding being a powerful thing within the group. They suggested that participants reported a growing sense of closeness and felt less threatened as a result.

Self-disclosure was a critical transaction within the group, as reported by several of those interviewed. Sometimes quite personal or intimate issues were shared. It is sometimes difficult and challenging to do this and much anxiety prevails. Some participants said that they began to learn more about themselves as they began to self-disclose, while another participant said that she learned to share more of herself when she expressed herself freely rather than being triggered into it. As people responded to the issues revealed, further disclosure took place for one participant. The agency supervisors also referred to the willingness that these participants showed to engage in self–disclosure.

However, there was some negative comment regarding the process of self-disclosure, especially with regard to the refusal or holding back by some members of the group. This

was expressed in terms of disappointment that these members did not take part and was seen as a sad thing.

Feedback is what participants often receive within a group setting following self-disclosure. It is a critical aspect of personal development training for counselling students. Participants in this study learned how others experienced them in a group setting. While some participants found this difficult early on, they came to value the experience and indeed invited it.

Challenge is an important aspect within counselling and it is often as a result of being challenged that we increase our awareness of ourselves. This is particularly true within a group setting and this is how the participants experienced it. Some said how it was both anxiety provoking and at the same time rewarding. Others distinctly felt a "shift" as a result of being challenged. One participant said that the greatest challenge for her was to challenge others, although she appreciated herself growing as a result of being challenged. The experience of being challenged seems to have caused group members to change and there was a general acceptance that this was a productive thing. Facilitators appeared to see a balance between support on the one hand and challenge on the other. There was also an acknowledgement that the dynamics within the group can themselves be challenging to the group members. One facilitator said there was a healthy expectation to be challenged, while the agency supervisors observed that these graduates were open to being challenged and to discussing their issues.

Risk was a common theme expressed by the participants. This can be seen as exposing the vulnerable parts of oneself and perhaps being judged. One participant said that while it was

pretty scary being exposed, she felt less risky as a result and was able to be more self-revealing. One facilitator believed that the greatest risk for group members was to be rejected and judged as unimportant.

Safety and trust were serious issues for participants and many expressed their discomfort at times. However, regardless of the discomfort, participants said that taking part in the personal growth group was a positive experience in a caring, safe and trusting environment. The facilitators acknowledged the importance of respect and suggested that the group members changed over time due to the safety they felt within the group.

The **facilitators** were mentioned frequently as the participants described their experience in these groups and the meaning it held for them. Some participants were openly critical of the facilitators' role, saying that they could or should have intervened at times but didn't do so. Some participants were critical of a perceived reluctance on the part of the facilitators to insist that all members of the group participate, as well as their refusal to challenge the non-participants. This appeared to be a strongly held opinion expressed by these graduates. The facilitators themselves commented on the importance of being a model for appropriate behaviour within the group. It was also acknowledged that they as facilitators were being observed and evaluated by group members, and that participants were likely to question whether or not the facilitator could be trusted with the intimate details often disclosed by group members.

The **link to practice**, and in a sense the relevance of this kind of experience, was not lost on those interviewed. All of the graduates had been in practice as counsellors in a variety of settings. These included counselling agencies such as Centrecare, Relationships Australia,

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Holyoke, Palmerstown and Mercycare, or those associated with women's health centres. This had given them a good opportunity to evaluate whether or not the experience of the small personal growth group has a link to the practice of counselling, and indeed, both participants and agency supervisors alike believed that a strong link exists between the two. One participant declared that her self-awareness was commented on by others. Another participant said that his supervisors acknowledged him as being more empathic than those from other training institutions. Another participant made a strong link to practice, saying that the experience of the personal growth group had helped him to identify both his capabilities and his limitations in a practice setting. This of course is yet another link to self-awareness.

Several participants commented on the difference between Notre Dame graduates and those from other institutions. The consensus appears to be that those who have had this experience are superior in practice to those who have not. Agency supervisors said that it was about the level of self-awareness that was evident with students from The University of Notre Dame Australia. They reported a definite difference between students from Notre Dame and others in terms of how they cope, and suggested that in professional practice, there is definitely a link between personal growth and a counsellor's ability to be a part of group work at the agency.

5.3   Implications for counselling education

This study is significant, especially in terms of how professional counsellors are prepared for practice. The overwhelming response from the participants in this study is that this kind

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of deep, meaningful and personally developing aspect of training does make a difference as to how counsellors see themselves and also how they are perceived by their supervisors within counselling agencies – good reason to listen to what this experience appears to have meant to those who participated, as well as to the agency supervisors who appear in no doubt that the graduates from The University of Notre Dame Australia "stand apart" specifically due to a focus in their training on personal growth. However, further research is required to be certain that this kind of experiential learning does in fact make a difference in practice.

At the same time, the value of personal development training appears to be receiving greater acknowledgement from professional bodies such the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia [PACFA]. In 2007, PACFA recommended that experiential learning, or personal growth of some sort, be a requirement for professional counsellor training. However, they did not specifically say what format this should take and trainers therefore are somewhat confused and uncertain as to how they should be progressing. Rogers (1961) says that the extent to which we can create relationships that facilitate the growth of others as separate persons is a measure of the growth we have achieved in ourselves. This says a lot about relationships in counselling but it also suggests that achieving growth in oneself is strongly linked to the ability to facilitate growth in clients. One of the important questions therefore to be asked of counsellor educators and trainers is "How are we to train counsellors to facilitate growth in others as separate persons?"

There is growing support for the inclusion in curricula of specific units of study that will address the area of personal growth. Most counselling educators would agree that skills training is important and that there must continue to be exposure to skills practice so that trainees are comfortable with the interventions they make with clients. However, this is certainly not enough in so far as training goes. Students also require a good understanding of the human condition in terms of common theories and approaches to counselling. These ought to include the psychodynamic approaches of Freud, Jung and their followers, as well as the humanistic approaches offered by Gestalt, Existentialist and person-centred positions. The behavioural approaches of Cognitive therapy and Rational Emotive therapies are important, and there is also a need to include the post-modern approaches of Narrative therapy, Interpersonal therapy and Mindfulness to make students aware of the various approaches to counselling and therapy. Many schools of counselling now favour an eclectic approach where an attempt at integration is made.

It is the view of the author that even with copious amounts of time allocated to theories and skills training, there will still be a deficit in the preparation of these professional counsellors unless personal development is offered as an integral part of the curriculum and is prized and valued as being an important, if not the most important, aspect of training. Mearns and Thorne (1988) suggest that there is a strong relationship between the trainee counsellor and the human person who is involved in the process. Growth might mean an aspiration towards becoming the fully functioning person described so well by Rogers (1961) and refers to the several possibilities that exist when the internal world of the counsellor engages with the internal world of the client. Within the personal growth group experience, the trainee is encouraged to make the most of themselves as a therapeutic tool

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when engaging with the client. This is when there is a development within the person who is becoming a counsellor.

Research is scant in the area of personal growth in counsellor training, although McLeod (1993) does appear to support the notion that the person as counsellor is of greater significance in terms of effectiveness than which theoretical orientation is employed or indeed how skilful the questioning is by the counsellor. Johns (1998) is quite explicit when she says that the importance of giving due attention to personal development is unarguable. The personal aspects of growth in counsellor training are different, but are similar to developments that are taking place within other service professions. Much attention is now being given to the importance of attitudes and values within nursing and medical curricula, while the preparation of teachers for primary and secondary education places significant importance on the developmental continuum, with developmental psychology as a part of the core curriculum.

Whatever other techniques or approaches are being used in counselling, it seems that there is little doubt that the "real" relationship matters. There has always been an element of personal development training, with some courses insisting that participants engage in personal therapy as part of their professional preparation. The particular type of personal growth which is the focus of this study is not therapy, but it is easier at times to assert that this is so, than to ensure this is the case in reality.

This study demonstrates quite clearly that the experience of personal growth as part of the curriculum is highly valued by the participants. They all point to an increased level of self-awareness. Most acknowledge in an explicit manner that there has been great change in

them as individuals, while the positive link to practice is demonstrated by what the participants themselves said and is strongly supported by the agency supervisors.

This research supports the view that a personal development training approach to counsellor education is worthwhile and extremely valuable in the education and training of counsellors. The author strongly believes that this should be a compulsory approach to training and a requirement of registration with the professional counselling bodies in Australia.

5.4   Implications for future research

At present, many of the universities that favour the small group approach to personal development training exist primarily in the British Isles and the United States. There is, however, a significant change taking place within counsellor education and training in Australia and the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (the competent authority) has explicitly stated in its "standards for training" that it supports and advises that experiential personal development/personal growth ought to occur within training programs that are to be accredited by that body. The emergence of such an approach to counsellor training will allow for studies of comparison to take place. An example might be a comparative study between training programs that do use personal growth and those that do not. This might include an evaluation of counsellors themselves as to their experience of training. The increase in participant numbers would allow for greater claims to be made if it could be shown that personal growth experience in training is valuable. There is already a strong suggestion from scholars involved in counsellor training that further research is

required in the area of personal growth to guide the curriculum delivery of education and training in the profession (Armstrong et al. 2006; Johns, 1998; Lennie, 2007).

The small sample size of the current study might suggest a need for verification of the findings with other training institutions that show a commitment to personal growth within their curriculum. This might mean undertaking comparative studies (case studies) to see if the themes expressed by participants in other training institutions are similar to those identified in this study. Larger numbers would increase the possibility of extrapolating from the data and larger populations of trainees would give greater credibility to the suggestion that this approach to counsellor training is a valuable one.

It may also be possible to develop research instruments in the form of questionnaires to survey counsellors and/or clients as to their experience of counselling using the information gathered from this study. The themes identified by the participants in this study might form the basis of a hypothesis to sample larger numbers so that stronger conclusions can be drawn based on the evidence.

Clients might also form the basis of a research cohort to see what their experience is with counsellors who have had this type of personal growth as a part of their training. An extension of this might be to compare the client experiences with two groups of counsellors; one group who have had the personal group experience and the other group who have not.

It might also be worthwhile to compare training programs that are of different length or duration. Most counsellor training programs in Australia are of two years duration (Armstrong, 2006), although the present study was undertaken with participants who had undergone a three-year program.

A further group worth studying might be counsellor educators to ascertain their position regarding personal growth training. It may well be the case that there is a hesitation on the part of some educators to embrace such an approach within counsellor training. The reason for this may be that they have not undergone this type of training themselves.

There is also the possibility of further analysis of identified ordinate themes by an examination of the dynamic interaction between them. By linking, for example, the themes of vulnerability, self disclosure and emotional experience it may be possible to establish protocols for supervisors and group facilitators alike and this may strengthen the safety elements within these groups. The challenges that exist within these groups are those that facilitate change. Participants might be more supported in this change if the link between feedback and safety were further examined to allow inputs into the training programme.

These are firm proposals for further research in this important area of counsellor education and training.

5.5   Conclusion

Counselling training, quite correctly, engages its trainees in the pursuit of knowledge and goes to great lengths to ensure the skills base of its graduates. The preparation of effective,

dutiful and ethical counsellors also requires of them that they be aware of themselves. However, this is an area of training that is not as widely practiced in Australia as it is elsewhere in the world. The persons who commit themselves to counsellor training need professional preparation that engages the heart as well as the head. Counselling education ought not to have a narrow focus dealing only with knowledge and skills, because the therapeutic relationship or therapeutic alliance between counsellor and client is so critical to the outcomes. Effective counsellors possess significant self-knowledge. They have a personal awareness that allows them to separate their own internal processes from those of the client. In so doing, they are able to present themselves to the client in a congruent, empathic and unconditional manner. These qualities of congruence, advanced empathy and unconditional positive regard are what Rogers (1961) describes as the necessary and sufficient conditions to bring about awareness and change in the client. This approach to the client by the counsellor creates an atmosphere of trust and communicates to the client that they are cared for and concerned about. The client is therefore able to appreciate the intention of the counsellor to be of help.

This study attempted to evaluate the meaning and personal significance of the small group experience for a group of purposefully selected graduates from a counselling training program at university level in Australia. Using a phenomenological approach that included interpretation by the researcher, interviews were held, transcribed and analysed. The researcher engaged intimately with the data, and the statements made by the participants show that for all of those who participated in the study, it was a very significant experience indeed. The findings of this study are supported by both the facilitators of these groups and the agency supervisors who were also interviewed.

The participants strongly acknowledged the degree to which they have changed over a three-year period and cited the influence of their experience in personal growth as the major reason for bringing about this change. They also said that the experience was a positive one and that it has linked very well to their experience of clients in practice.

The experience of personal growth in the context of counsellor training produces counsellors who are self-aware, sensitive and responsive to the needs of the client. They are more intuitive and open and less defensive than counsellors who have not had this experience.

There continues to be discussion as to what constitutes the best method of training for counsellors, but there is growing support for a method of preparation that includes some element of personal development or personal growth training. The experience of vulnerability, self-disclosure and feedback provides a powerful learning experience for students. It is imperative that the boundaries pertaining to confidentiality are adhered to so that additional safety and comfort is provided for those taking part. It is often within the personal growth group that the students experience support and challenge in a manner that allows them to become less defensive and increases awareness of self. Communication is interpersonal, and the atmosphere is supportive of the participants as they ask the following questions: "Who am I?" and "What can I offer the clients who come into my care?" It is in this atmosphere of trust, risk, challenge and support which constitutes the personal growth group that increased awareness of personal issues can emerge. These issues can be internalised and integrated into the personality of the counsellor, and when these counsellors listen to the sound of the footsteps in the counselling room, they will know which footsteps belong to them.

It is the strong wish, hope and desire of the researcher that this dissertation can in some way

influence the discussion on future counsellor education and training in Australia.

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**UNIT OUTLINE OF "PERSONAL GROWTH GROUP",
OFFERED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME
AUSTRALIA**

THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA

School of Arts and Sciences (Counselling)

BACHELOR OF COUNSELLING

Unit Outline

Title: Personal Growth Group - Semester 1 and 2, 2007

Unit Code: CN202

Tuition Pattern: Experiential Group: Two hour group weekly

Prerequisites: Enrolment in the Bachelor of Counselling or Bachelor of Counselling/Bachelor of Behavioural Science Degree

Successful completion of CN102

Credits: 3

Group Facilitator: Ms Helen Wilson

Contact Numbers: 9433 0225

Description:

It is important for student counsellors to be able to reflect on their thoughts, emotions and behaviours in relation to various situations and to other people. This unit is experientially based and involves participating in a weekly group facilitated by an experienced professional counsellor. In particular, students will be encouraged to express and examine their emotional responses within the group. By participating in the personal growth group

and keeping a reflective journal, students can explore personal issues that may interfere with good practice.

Relating to other group members provides a way to experience and explore aspects of interpersonal communication. In particular the group experience creates opportunities for students to practice effective communication skills in relation to giving feedback, challenging, supporting, dealing with conflict etc.

The group will establish clear guidelines and ground rules at the beginning of the semester. A contract of confidentiality will be negotiated to establish safety in the group.

Student Outcomes:

This unit runs for the full year and by the end of the unit you will have developed:

- A greater understanding of yourself and your responses to others

- A sensitivity to the emotional states of other group members

- Awareness of personal issues that may be potential blocks in relation to good practice

- Greater skills in interpersonal communication

- Skills in giving and receiving feedback

- Skills in challenging others in a way that does not promote defensiveness

- Understanding and experience of what it means to be congruent

- Increased awareness, respect and acceptance of others

Personal Goals and Personal Growth

These are the student's responsibility to identify and work on throughout the year. Inevitably they will be brought to the group experience and will be reflected on in the reflective journal and synopsis.

Assessment:

Assessment type	Week due	Student's competence, skills, understanding being assessed
1 Reflective journal	Weekly: Following each session students will reflect on the group experience and keep notes in a reflective journal	Capacity to record and consider experiences and to learn from them
2 Personal Goals and Personal Growth	At the beginning of the course students will identify areas for personal growth and report on progress with these at the end of the course	Self-awareness in relation to potential areas for personal growth
3 Reflective Journal Synopsis	To be handed in Week 13	Ability to summarize your reflective journal and understand with some depth, the personal challenge and growth that has occurred.
4 Peer Assessment	During Group time Week 12	Capacity to give feedback to other group members
5 Group process assessment	During Group time Week 13	Awareness of group process and ability to assess it

Details of assessment

(NB: This is a Pass/Fail Unit)

Reflective Journal Synopsis (max. 2000 words)

Students are asked to keep an ongoing personal journal throughout the year as a way of recording and reflecting upon their monthly development, changes and growth. Students are encouraged to record their experiences, responses, reactions and when considered relevant, their dreams, through written diary format as well as creative expression, poetry and art.

By Week 13 students are to submit to the group facilitator a personal growth synopsis, outlining with examples from their journal, their experiences of challenge, growth and development. Students should include continuing goals for personal development and change.

Peer Assessment

Students will give each other specific feedback during the last group session in relation to their participation in the group and their perceptions of each other. The protocol for this will be advised by the facilitator.

Group Assessment

At the end of the year, students will undertake a group assessment in relation to group process. This will be discussed within the group. This may also be done mid-year

Criteria for Marking

Students will be given either a pass or fail grade, but the facilitator will provide feedback to each student in relation to their self-awareness, growth and change.

NB:

The group experience is intended to increase self-awareness and assist students to develop their "self" as counsellor. This should include ongoing feedback to each other about any aspects of "self" which may inhibit their capacity to be present and helpful to others.

EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS

Attendance:

Attendance at all sessions is required unless prior arrangements with group facilitator are made. Medical reasons for absence must be accompanied by a medical certificate. Please use the official medical form from the University. This can be obtained from the School Administration officer. Students should not miss two consecutive sessions.

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Students who have unexplained absence for more than 15% of group sessions each semester will be deemed not to have met the requirements of the unit and will be awarded a FAIL.

Written Work

Students are expected to submit written work on or before the due date.

Course Cover sheets must be used and a dated receipt retained by the student.

Medical reasons for late submission must be accompanied by a medical certificate. (Use official form obtainable from College secretary)

Penalties may accrue if student has not organised an extension

Text Book Requirements:

There is no required reading for this unit. Texts and readings will be advised as appropriate

APPENDIX II: **UNIT OUTLINE OF "PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT 1: EXPERIENTIAL GROUP PROCESS", OFFERED BY JANSEN NEWMAN INSTITUTE OF COUNSELLING AND APPLIED PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Code: UPD1106C

Status: Core   Compulsory

Credit points: 6

Prerequisites: Nil

Level: Year 1   Semester 1

Hours: 3 hrs per week x 6 sessions = 21 contact hours

It is expected that students will undertake an additional 42 hours in individual and group study, recording a personal journal and preparation for the assessment.

Purpose, Outcomes and Content

Purpose

Personal development in a small group context has been for many years a well-recognised method of counsellor/change agent training. Experiencing their own vulnerability, resistance, and openness in the context of the vulnerability, resistance and openness of peers, is a powerful learning context for students. Moreover, it could be contended that every would-be-counsellor or change agent should have experienced her/his own

vulnerability, resistance to change, defences, and 'blind spots' in relation to a cross section of others. Without such experience of the 'role of client', the possibility of responsible, ethical and empathic work with one's own clients becomes more problematic. A therapy group provides students with valuable role modelling and strong support as they struggle with their own personal issues. This subject interacts with Practicum I: Core Skills, since students identify personal blocks, which interfere with their counselling, and can then take these difficulties direct to their group for exploration. Student learning of the principles of group process provides a vital underpinning for their later grasp of the principles of system change (Year Two theory subjects) and organisational change (Year Three). In their group, students also see demonstrated many of the concepts that they encounter in Human Change Theory I: Foundations classes, for example, projection and transference.

Learning Outcomes

On satisfactory completion of the subject, students will be able to:

- Discuss human change dynamics through reflecting on their own personal change work within the group context

- Recognise the skills of a competent and experienced group leader through their own observation and experience

- Critically reflect on their own experiences as a group member and the possible implications for themselves and others in a range of contexts

- Demonstrate skills for assertive communication and counselling skills in relation to other students, within the context of the group

- Demonstrate beginning capacity to give honest feedback to other group members about how they experience them, and learn to receive similar feedback from others.

Content Synopsis

Students become members of a small (n=8-13) therapeutic group that is then carried through for both semesters in Year 1. Under the guidance of a skilled group leader who is also a faculty member, students learn first hand about the dynamics of small groups, and may volunteer to participate in personal therapeutic work. Students also complete set readings and undertake video viewing to help them analyse and reflect on the group processes they have observed. The Yalom model of group therapy is utilised to inform students' theoretical understanding of the group processes with which they are engaged.

Delivery and Assessment

Delivery:

Face to face using highly experiential work incorporating small group adult learning principles.

Assessment:

Students are required to undertake three assessments for this subject.

Assessment 1:   Group Participation   10%

Students are required to attend a minimum of 80% of the group sessions in Personal Development 1. They are required to not only attend but be actively engaged in the group process demonstrating supportive behaviour and self-awareness. Through close observation, support and feedback from the group leader (and other group members) students are expected to demonstrate development of the requisite attributes and skills for engaging in and reflecting on their group experience.

Assessment 2:   Group Report 1   40%

Students are required to critically reflect on their experiences within the group process across the first three sessions, identifying their feelings and observations. They are also required to analyse and compare their own group's behaviour at a process level with that observed in a video case study from Yalom's therapy group. Each student submits a written report of 1000-1200 words addressing these requirements.

Assessment 3:   Group Report 2   50%

Students are required to critically reflect on their experiences within the group process across the semester having now participated in six group sessions. Students are expected to provide a higher level of self-awareness and analysis than that in Assessment 2. Here they are required to critically reflect on their own subjective experience within the group, provide an "objective" analysis of their own patterns of behaviour within the group and analyse their own group's behaviour at a process level drawing on concepts from Yalom's theory. Each student submits a written report of 1000-1200 words addressing these requirements.

Bibliography

Set Texts:

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
NOTRE DAME
A U S T R A L I A

Dear potential participant,

My name is Martin Philpott and I am a senior research student at The University of Notre Dame Australia.

The title of my research project is:

An examination of the meaning and personal significance of the small group experience for a mature-age, graduate counselling group following three years of personal development group participation.

The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the small group experience for counselling graduates and to understand the meaning and value of this method of training for counsellors.

Participants will be invited to take part in a fifty minute interview. The interview will be tape-recorded. Information collected will be held in strictest confidence. You will be offered a transcript of the interview, and I will ask that you would comment in writing on whether you agree that I have captured your experience.

Before the interview I will ask you some questions that will relate to items such as age, gender, and levels of anxiety. I will also ask you to sign a consent form and will be pleased to answer any questions you may have about the study. You are not required to take part in this study and you may withdraw at any time without explanation. Data collected will be

stored securely in the University's College of Health in a secure cabinet for five years and then destroyed. No identifying information will be used and the results will be made available to participants.

Due to the personal and sensitive nature of the information you may disclose in this interview, I will ensure that emotional support is available to you if you require it. I will contact you one week following the interview to ensure that you are comfortable with what took place.

The Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of Notre Dame Australia has given this study approval. Dr George Trippe of the College is supervising the research project. If you have any queries regarding the research please contact me directly or Dr Trippe on 9275 5966.

I thank you for your consideration and hope you will agree to participate in the research project.

Yours sincerely,

Mr Martin Philpott

Telephone (08) 9433 0218   Email: mphilpott@nd.edu.au

If participants have any complaint regarding the manner in which a research project is conducted, it may be given to the researcher or, alternatively, to the Provost, The University of Notre Dame Australia, PO Box 1225 Fremantle WA 6959, phone (08) 9433 0846.

THE UNIVERSITY OF
NOTRE DAME
A U S T R A L I A

An examination of the meaning and personal significance of the small group experience for a mature-age, graduate counselling group following three years of personal development group participation.

INFORMED CONSENT

I, _____

Hereby agree to participate in the above research project.

- I have read and understood the information sheet about this project and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I realise that I can withdraw from the project at any time without prejudice.

- I understand that all information gathered will be treated as strictly confidential.

- I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published provided my name or other identifying information is not disclosed.

Signed (participant): _____ Date: _____