

WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE? : A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE DECISION TO  
PURSUE A MASTER'S DEGREE IN COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

by

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## **Abstract**

While much has been written about students' career development, not much is known about the real-life process by which students come to career decisions in today's changing world of work. No studies have yet investigated the career decision-making (CDM) process of master's in counselling psychology students specifically.

As a result, the purpose of this study was to explore how and why people decide to study counselling. My research question was: "What is the experience of making and implementing the decision to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology?" Using the method of narrative inquiry, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight master's in counselling psychology students and the resulting narratives suggest thirteen cross-narrative themes. These themes encapsulate students' experiences in terms of the process of decision-making, the influence of social context, motivations for pursuing the field of counselling, and motivations for entering and sustaining graduate studies. The findings suggest there is no one straight path that leads people to study counselling, but rather a process involving individual experiences, the influence of others, and a varying tempo of reflection and action. Both planned and unplanned events, as well as decision-making through intuition, emotion, and sometimes a sense of destiny or spiritual connection, are implicated. Themes also suggest that participants chose to study counselling because of the enjoyment of helping experiences, an interest in people, and a desire for meaningful work.

Findings indicate the need for additional qualitative research into CDM processes. Implications for the practice of career counselling include expanding beyond traditional career counselling theories to include integration of non-rational and contextual decision-making approaches.

## **Preface**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The world of work has experienced significant changes and with these changes the old models of career theory and career decision-making have been challenged (Amundson, 2006; Chope, 2005). As noted by McKay, Bright, and Pryor (2005), in an ever-changing environment that is marked by economic, social, and cultural shifts, there has been a move toward offering more career interventions to diverse individuals throughout their lifespan and more emphasis on meaning and contextual factors that influence career development.

Recognition of the limitations of positivistic career counselling models has led to increased support for services based on postmodern perspectives (Clark, Severy, & Ali Sawyer, 2004).

Understanding the lived experience of career decision-making (CDM) within this changing context is important and can further inform career counselling theory and practice.

For instance, it could be the case that people are making decisions differently in the current shifting work environment (Amundson, Borgen, Iaquina, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010).

Several authors have noted that much career development literature and practice continues to rely on static, rational, trait-factor approaches to decision-making (Bubany, Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2008; Phillips, 1997; Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, & Gravino, 2001). This notion is challenged by Phillips (1997) who states, “Those who have considered what actually happens in the decision-making process have offered the nearly unanimous conclusion that rational decision-making simply does not reflect the decider's reality” (p. 278). By coming to better understand real-world CDM processes we can develop interventions more in-line with how clients perceive decision-making (Bubany et al., 2008).

While some qualitative research has been conducted to explore CDM processes from the career decider's perspective (Amundson et al., 2010; Iaquina, 2007; Schultheiss, Kress,

Manzi, & Glasscock, 2001) and the perspective of students specifically (Bubany et al., 2008; Lent et al., 2002), the qualitative investigation of career decision-making is still in its infancy. Deciding and implementing the decision to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology is a part of career decision-making in the sense it involves the choice to add more education to one's life experience and it may indicate an occupational choice. Similarly, little is known about the experience of deciding to pursue graduate studies. Much of the literature in this area concludes that the primary motivation of graduate students is either to expand their earning potential or to delay career decision-making (Bowman, 2005; "Chapter 2: Decision to attend graduate school," 2000; Luzzo, 2000) yet few of these studies asked about students' experiences directly. I have not found any research addressing the process by which people decide to study a master's degree in counselling psychology and few studies which address students' motivations for choosing the discipline of counselling.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to better understand students' CDM process from the perspective of those who are in or recently graduated from a master's in counselling psychology degree program. I sought to solicit the story of their experience of making and implementing the decision to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology. While the impetus for this research stemmed from my own personal observations and curiosity about the career decision-making process, I also believe it is important to add career decision-makers' voices to the career counselling literature. Specifically, this research expands the qualitative understanding of the CDM process and address a gap in knowledge about master's-level trainee counsellors' motivations to study counselling. Along with adding to the qualitative literature in this area, this research may help career services in universities and

communities better understand the career development needs of undergraduate students or returning adult learners who consider progressing to graduate studies. A better understanding of student career decision-making could inform the type and quality of services that would be most helpful to these populations.

### **Research Question**

The research question which guided this study was: “What is the experience of making and implementing the decision to pursue a master’s degree in counselling psychology?” This open question was designed to allow many facets of the decision-making process to emerge and for the participants to choose which aspects of the experience they conveyed in their story. There were some additional questions that were not asked directly, yet the CDM literature indicated were likely to be discussed as part of the decision-making process. This included the role of internal factors (personal interests, personality, values, etc.) and external factors (influence of family, role models, economy, etc.). The actual process of decision-making, in terms of being logical, intuitive or a combination of both, was also expected to be noteworthy. Lastly, I anticipated discussions to include the motivations for studying counselling, including any personally significant life experiences, which may have played a role in the decision to study counselling. I review what is currently known about these topics in greater detail in the literature review section of this thesis document.

### **Researcher’s Subjectivity**

My interest in this research study emerged from personal experiences as a post-secondary student, career development practitioner, and master’s-level counsellor trainee. Each of these roles has given me a different view into the career decision-making process and has made me curious about individual experiences of career development.

I have been fascinated by the question of how people chose their particular career path for many years. I believe this began with my own “career crisis” early in my undergraduate studies. In my first year of university, I enrolled as a Bachelor of Science student. With little parental or teacher guidance, I made my selection based on good marks in high school science classes and the assumption that this practical choice would lead to some kind of “good” job at the end. I became quite distraught when I discovered that I did not enjoy, or have talent for, the study of science. I sought help from the university career centre. It was the mid-1990’s and the formula for career assistance was to meet individually with a registered psychologist and complete a battery of career assessments. I recall feeling disconnected and confused during this process – as if I was being dissected and analysed without understanding how this would help me decide what to do with my life. I also felt little concern or interest from the career counsellor. While some of the assessments did increase my self-knowledge in very beneficial ways, it was actually the negative counselling experience which spurred my desire to enter a helping profession. I clearly recall the moment I made this decision. The career counsellor was prescribing which career possibilities indicated on an assessment were likely suitable for me. I stopped listening and thought to myself, “You know, actually, I think I want to do your job and do it better.” This combination of early occupational angst and youthful egotism was the starting point of my interest in career decision-making.

It took another few years of pursuing travels and different work experiences for me to return to university to complete my studies in psychology. My occupational interests changed frequently during this time but eventually returned to career development. Volunteering at a university career centre turned into a paid position which ultimately led me to five years as a

career development practitioner. My desire for more advanced training was the motivation to enter a master's in counselling psychology degree program and this has expanded my competencies to provide personal counselling. I have had the honour of hearing the career concerns of students and non-students alike and have come to appreciate the diversity in individual career decision-making journeys. I have come to a holistic view of career development where I expect personal and contextual factors, planned and unplanned events, and logical and intuitive reasoning to all come together in the multiple career decisions made over a lifetime. I chose this topic in part to further my understanding of career development and challenge my assumptions through the qualitative study of career decision-making.

Upon entry into the master's degree in counselling psychology program, my natural curiosity about career decision-making led me to listen to the reasons why others had decided to pursue the study of counselling. These informal conversations highlighted the heterogeneity of career decisions leading to a master's in counselling psychology degree. I did, however, notice that many of my classmates were motivated to pursue counselling work with a particular population or to research a specific area because of their own life experiences. Learning that little research had been done on the career decision-making of counselling students led me to decide this was a topic worth investigation.

### **Rationale for the Study**

As mentioned earlier, this research was intended to shed light on the experiences of career decision-makers who decide to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology. In addition to adding to the qualitative literature about CDM, this research may help career counsellors and other career practitioners better understand the needs of clients considering graduate studies. Common practices in current career counselling are not generally based on

a real-life understanding of career deciders' needs. Furthermore, the additional focus on motivation for choosing counselling as a subject of study and as an occupation may also add to the knowledge of why people become counsellors.

My participant group was comprised of master's students. As such, it was important to look at models of career counselling with post-secondary students. Currently, practices are often based on traditional career counselling theories that stem from positivistic trait-matching models and do not necessarily address the range of factors included in current decision-making. For example, in the book *Career Counseling of College Students: An Empirical Guide to Strategies that Work*, Hartung and Niles (2000) describe the established and emerging career theories which can best guide the delivery of a variety of career services. It is notable that most theories mentioned seem to focus on internal variables and logical decision-making. These include theories such as: Holland's theory of vocational personalities and work environment; Krumboltz's learning theory; Lent, Brown and Hackett's social cognitive theory; and Sampson's cognitive information processing approach. It is noted that the application of these theories is often through the use of career assessment instruments and computer-assisted career-guidance programs (more recently in the form of online resources). Super's developmental life-span, life-space is one theory mentioned which does integrate contextual variables, such as other life roles, and recognizes that career development involves a lifelong series of decisions (Hartung & Niles, 2000). The authors devote little space to the potential of more holistic postmodern theories for career counselling of post-secondary students, perhaps because these theories have not yet been integrated into the mainstream of career counselling research and practice. In my personal experience of providing career development services to students at three different post-secondary

institutions, I have also noticed a focus on rational decision-making. Exploration of individual traits such as interest, values, and personality combined with occupational research are common practice, with little discussion of intuitional decision-making or the role of chance and change.

A greater understanding of career decision-making and implementation processes could be of benefit to post-secondary career services to help them improve their approach. For example, Krieshok (2001) conducted a review of career decision-making literature and suggested implications for changes in post-secondary career centre practices. Since the literature notes that much decision-making is unconscious and deciders need to adapt to a changing world, career centres need to put less emphasis on decidedness as the most critical outcome, and more emphasis on acting as one's agent and addressing client resistance to anything but short term interventions (Krieshok, 2001).

Understanding individual CDM processes could also help us better conceptualize what motivates people to study counselling at the graduate level. Currently, literature in this area is lacking. What has been explored are the career development needs of graduate students (Luzzo, 2000) as well as those of non-traditional college students (Luzzo, 1993) . There is also limited research on the career development of master's-level counselling students (Busacca & Wester, 2006; Scholl & Cascone, 2010; Wiesenberg & Aghakhani, 2007) but I have yet to find any research directly addressing the career decision-making process to enter this program of study.

More has been written about the overall motivations for working as a counsellor, psychologist, or psychiatrist. However, these studies have generally looked at practitioners who have been in their field for a number of years. Research suggests that some common



reasons why people enter helping professions stems from early experiences (DiCaccavo, 2002; Fussell & Bonney, 1990), the need to resolve one's own problems as "wounded healers" (Farber, Manevich, Metzger, & Saypol, 2005; Sedgwick, 1994), and the general desire to help people (Farber et al., 2005; Oster, 2006). My study has added the perspective of those who are at the beginning of their counselling studies and potential counselling career and has offered another view into the reasons why people choose counselling as their occupation. This is detailed in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

I believe it is important to assess our reasons for studying counselling and entering the counselling profession for several reasons. The practice of counselling is a highly personal endeavour; the work is intertwined with the personhood of the counsellor. It is important to be self-aware and to consider our own particular blind spots, triggers and motivations (Farber et al., 2005). As further noted by Farber (2005), we need to recognize that what we may want from counselling work, such as understanding motivations for human behaviour or an intimate connection with another, may not be what our clients need from us. In fact, we have an ethical obligation to ensure we do not put our own needs before the needs of our clients. As such, the professional code of ethics for Canadian psychologists instructs psychologists to consider how their own backgrounds and needs interact with their activities, It also asks professionals to ensure they minimize the impacts of these as they engage in responsible caring and maintain integrity of the counselling relationship (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000).

I also believe that reflecting on the process that leads people to study counselling can help counselling students maintain a sense of meaning in counselling work and help protect against disillusionment and burnout. A recent study of value orientations of master's-level

counsellor trainees proposed that facilitation of values awareness early in counsellor preparation may diminish issues of role conflict, incongruence, and ambiguity (Busacca, Beebe, & Toman, 2010).

## **Definitions**

Before examining the research literature in greater detail, it is important to define some key terms. These terms are referenced both in my study and in associated research literature.

The term career is familiar to most, but likely means different things to different people. As noted by Young and Collin (2000) the word is flexible and elastic, allowing it to adapt to different functions and contexts. Traditionally, it has been synonymous with the idea of paid work or one's occupation. An expanded view, however, sees career as the totality of occupations and other life roles (student, parent, volunteer, retiree, etc.) one holds throughout the lifespan. We can view career as what would be included if one were to write the story of one's life (Cochran, 1990). It is personal and an expression of individual self-development. According to the glossary of career development terms:

Career is a lifestyle concept that involves the sequence of work, learning, and leisure activities in which one engages throughout a lifetime. Careers are unique to each person and are dynamic; unfolding throughout life. Careers include how persons balance their paid and unpaid work and personal life roles. (Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners, 2004, p. 139)

Following from this idea of career, the term career development is used to describe one's shifts and changes throughout life. According to the National Career Development Association (2003), "Career development is the total constellation of psychological,

sociological, educational, physical, economic, and chance factors that combine to influence the nature and significance of work in the total lifespan of any given individual” (Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners, 2004, p. 139). It is an ongoing process of getting ready to choose, choosing, and continuing to make choices from many occupational options (Brown, 2002).

Career decision-making (CDM) is a term that often refers to the process by which one decides to pursue a particular occupation within their career. Traditionally, this had been defined in logical psychological terms. For example, Harren (1979) describes a career decision-making model as a description of a psychological process in which one organizes information, deliberates among alternatives, and makes a commitment to a course of action. He defines this as a rational decision-making style. Alternate concepts of CDM include acknowledgement that career decision-making may include “other-than-rational” approaches including uncertainty, happenstance, and context into the process (Murtagh, Lopes, & Lyons, 2011).

Career counselling can also be conceptualized in a number of different ways. If we take the analogy of career as a story, then the role of career counsellor becomes that of helping clients recite and develop narratives of their vocational lives. In the postmodern view, career counsellors are the co-authors (Savickas, 1993). The specific work of career counselling is described as, “The process in which a counsellor works collaboratively to help clients/students clarify, specify, implement, and adjust to work-related decisions” (Amundson, Harris-Bowlsbey, & Niles, 2008, p. 7).

There are also terms relevant to students that I use and define in specific ways. First are the labels non-traditional students, returning adult learners, or mature students. These

words are used interchangeably to refer to students who are older than those who progressed to graduate studies immediately after their undergraduate degree. These students may have been out of school for several years before entering graduate study and likely have some experience in the world of work. Several of my participants fit into this category.

It is also important to distinguish between the terms graduate student, master's student and doctoral student. In some research literature, the term graduate student refers to either master's or doctoral students, or sometimes both. When reporting on research with student participants, I will specify if the participants were at the master's or doctoral level when known. The term graduate students will be used in reference to both groups.

## **Overview**

In Chapter 1, I have introduced the purpose of this study and how it was designed to shed light on the decision-making and decision-implementation process to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology. I shared my personal motivations for researching this subject and suggested it has significance as a topic of study for both career counselling research and practice. Next, in Chapter 2, I provide a comprehensive review of career theory and research related to CDM. Chapter 3 outlines the method used to conduct this study, while Chapter 4 reports my findings. Lastly, Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the findings and their implications.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Changes in Career Development**

As discussed in Chapter 1, for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the dominant theories and practices of career counselling have been based on positivistic trait-matching models. The basis for this traditional approach emerged at a time in history where people often held a job for life and decision-making was a one-time event completed early in adulthood (Patton & McMahon, 2006). As such, career decision-making was seen as a logical, cognitive process.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world of work and the lives of workers became increasingly complex. The work world has been impacted by increased globalization, demographic shifts and advances in technology and information (Amundson, 2005). Workers can no longer assume that their best personal job match will be available in the labour market (Borgen, 1997). With less stable employment, people have to accept more responsibility for career self-management. As career development now occurs throughout the lifespan, complex interactions of individual, family, and societal factors are included in the career decision-making process. This has led to more acknowledgement of non-rational career decision-making models that incorporate elements of uncertainty, chance, and intuition.

Current master's in counselling psychology degree students made their decision to pursue their studies within this complex context, and they will continue their career development amidst it. Understanding the current body of knowledge concerning topics related to counselling student CDM will provide an important comparison point for the career stories of my participants. I have chosen to review relevant research literature for the following areas: career decision-making models; post-secondary student CDM; the career development of non-traditional students; graduate student and counselling student career

development; positive psychology; and motivations to become a counsellor. Through this review, I hope to provide a synopsis of the research that informs our current view of student CDM within the modern career development context.

### **Career Decision-making Models**

Views of career decision-making have been shifting from previously held beliefs. For many years, career counselling theories and interventions have worked from the assumption that career decisions are best made through careful consideration of information about one's self and the world of work, weighed out rationally to make the best choice. While this approach may have been suitable when we could presume the work world was stable and people maintained their occupational choice throughout life, many authors have suggested that this no longer fits today's rapidly shifting labour market where changing occupations is the norm (Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009; Phillips, 1997). It also does not take into account the influence of the larger social and societal systems in which we live (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Furthermore, the rational approach may be more of an ideal than descriptive of how career decision-makers realistically make choices in the real world (Phillips, 1997). Vocational decision-making is moving from a place where "it's all about the match" to one closer to "it's all about adapting to change" (Krieshok et al., 2009). This shift has implications on the experience of making the career decision to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology.

As with several career theories (e.g., trait-factor, person-environment fit), the dominant rational model of career decision-making dates back to the concept of "true reasoning" first described in Parsons (1909) book *Choosing a Vocation* (Hartung & Blustein, 2002; Krieshok et al., 2009; Murtagh et al., 2011; Phillips, 1997). In it he states:

In the wise choice of a vocation there are three broad factors:

- (1) a clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations, and their causes;
- (2) a knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work;
- (3) true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts” (Parsons, 1909, p. 5).

The precise meaning of “true reasoning” is unclear, although it has been most widely interpreted to mean the use of logic and rationality devoid of context (Hartung & Blustein, 2002). Many modern theories of career development implicitly or explicitly recommend that career decisions be made rationally. Yet, little specific advice is offered about how to weigh and evaluate the information in the decision-making process (Phillips, 1994).

A number of theorists have sought to describe the specific process of career decision-making, often borrowing from research in other disciplines. Tiedman and O’Hara (1963) and Harren (1979) developed extensive theoretical models that conceptualized CDM in a developmental process from awareness, exploration, crystallization, and then to the commitment to a decision (Tinsley, 1992). Other rational models have emerged from expected utility (EU) models of decision-making in cognitive psychology. EU proposes that individuals identify an optimal outcome by systematically calculating the perceived value of different options and then selecting the one which maximizes value (Murtagh et al., 2011). Piz and Harren (1980) and Katz (1966) extended this approach to career decision-making in a process that saw all occupational alternatives be considered (Murtagh et al., 2011). However, there have been challenges to this model of decision-making which requires an enormous amount of accurate information to be computed in a complex way. Kahneman, Slovic and

Tversky (1982) concluded that people regularly deviate from the “rules” of expected utility because we can only process limited amounts of information and we use heuristics such as anchoring, availability and representativeness to make conclusions based on this limited information (Krieshok, 1998; Phillips, 1997). This work was used by Gati (1986) to promote a sequential elimination model of career decision-making. In this model each occupational alternative is viewed as a set of aspects and at each stage an aspect is selected according to its importance and those lacking are eliminated, resulting in a final choice without full comparison of all alternatives (Gati, 1986). Sampson, Reardon and Lenz’s (1996) cognitive information processing approach (CIP) is another sequential CDM model, one which continues to be presented in current articles and text books.

Despite the pervasive influence of rational decision-making approaches in career theory and practice, there is also acknowledgement of their limitations. Phillips (1994, 1997) and Krieshok (1998, 2009) have presented cogent arguments for the integration of what some authors call “other-than-rational” approaches to career decision-making. There are different assumptions behind each model: rational choice models value reason, logic, objectivity and independence while alternative or other-than-rational models value intuition, emotion, subjectivity, and interdependence. Rational models emphasize the individual decision-maker while alternative models emphasize the circumstances surrounding the decision-making process (Phillips, as cited in Hartung and Blustein, 2002)

Taking the view of Super’s life-span, life-space context, Phillips (1994, 1997) suggests we make decisions in a complex field shifting with time and different opportunities and decisions spanning multiple life roles, and as such we need to revise the way we define adaptive decision-making to include more alternative models. She suggests that, “...actual



decisional events typically include neither a known and stable field of alternatives, nor the complete and consistent information that are necessary for rational decision-making” (p. 45). Other-than-rational decision-making strategies she summarizes include intuitive deciding (“I just knew it”), emotionally expressive deciding (“It felt right”) and consultative or imitative deciding (“He says it is the best choice”). Her argument that these strategies are well suited to a shifting environment would be strengthened by more discussion of the underlying mechanisms and research studies showing successful CDM using these strategies in different contexts. Phillips (1994) also suggests that the emphasis on decidedness in rational decision-making is misplaced, since our theories of career development largely acknowledge that change will occur over the lifespan. Tentativeness is to be encouraged alongside alternative decision-making models.

Krieshok (1998, 2009) presents an anti-introspectivist (AI) view of CDM which challenges many strongly held assumptions in the field. The AI view, based on cognitive and experimental social psychology research literature, is that decision-making is largely performed at an unconscious level and that reflection on decision-making processes is futile and possibly detrimental to good decisions (Krieshok, 1998). Furthermore, decision-makers tend to err when reflecting on a decision but are not aware of this tendency. He suggests that given the limits of rationality and the abundance of non-conscious processing in decision-making, that a trilateral model of CDM is needed. This model includes a combination of rational and intuitive processing, in conjunction with real-world occupational engagement that allows the decision-maker to have a consistent fund of information and experience to draw upon. While some research data related to measurement of the construct of

occupational engagement was presented, no conclusive evidence was given about the utility of the trilateral model of CDM.

Researchers who have created well-known alternative frameworks of career decision-making include Gelatt's (1989) positive uncertainty, Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz's (1999) planned happenstance, Pryor and Bright's (2003) chaos theory of careers, and McMahon and Patton's (1999) system theory framework. I will summarize each briefly in turn.

Gelatt (1989) reversed his rational decision-making approach to a framework based on "positive uncertainty" which better fits a changing world where the future is no longer predictable. He suggests that while rational decision-making strategies are no longer sufficient, they are not obsolete. In addition to rational decision-making, "What is appropriate now is a decision and counselling framework that helps clients deal with change and ambiguity, accept uncertainty and inconsistency, and utilize the non-rational and intuitive side of thinking and choosing" (Gelatt, 1989, p. 252). He suggests, seemingly paradoxically, to be positive in the face of uncertainty in career decisions and encourage clients to be flexible with their goals. Goals can result from action rather than the other way around.

In a similar stance, Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz (1999) encourage career counsellors to promote clients' ability to take advantage of the inevitable unplanned events that influence everyone's career, and to take actions to encourage opportunities to arise. Their planned happenstance approach to career decisions favours undecidedness over premature decision-making in a world where career opportunities are constantly changing. The term "open-mindedness" replaces the notion of career indecision, and career counsellors

are challenged to reject the traditional view that uncertainty is to be diagnosed, treated, and overcome. Career decision-makers are encouraged to initiate actions despite their uncertainty and to learn skills such as curiosity, risk-taking, and persistence that will allow them to seize opportunities beneficial to their career.

The chaos theory of careers (Pryor & Bright, 2003) is another non-linear way to conceptualize career decision-making. Drawing from chaos concepts in science, this theory emphasizes complexity, change, chance, and dynamic order (Bright, 2010). In essence, it suggests that people are subject to a complex array of influences, which dramatically reduce the ability to predict future behaviour so the emphasis should instead be on the individual's emergent patterns of behaviour (Bright, 2008). Given that career decision-makers can be influenced by systems ranging from one person, to the events of world politics, decision-makers both create and respond to changes in an ongoing, interactive way (Pryor & Bright, 2006). In this environment, decidedness is not always the best outcome of CDM.

McMahon and Patton's (1999) system theory framework of career counselling is not a decision-making model, but this modern meta-theoretical perspective is part of the move towards alternative views of CDM. It takes a contextual view of career development where the individual system, the social system and the environmental/societal system dynamically interact in a process of recursiveness, change, and chance (McMahon, 2005). Systems thinking shows the complex interconnectedness of the various influences on individuals' career decision-making (Bright & Pryor, 2005).

Recent research literature supports the notion that alternative CDM is used by deciders. A study by Murtagh et al. (2011) was conducted to look at other-than-rational CDM in voluntary career changes. In a qualitative study of eight women in England, they found

that other-than-rational CDM processes were important, while the role of positive emotion and cognitive reinforcement of their decision were other key factors. Other qualitative studies have shown that relational life, meaning, and economic realities factor into career decisions, showing that CDM is embedded within the life context (Amundson et al., 2010). An investigation of the career development of thirteen prominent female counseling psychologists highlighted the role of chance events in career decisions (Williams et al., 1998).

From this select review of CDM literature, it is clear that the view of how people make career decisions is shifting. The exclusive focus on rational appraisal of alternatives has shifted to acknowledgement that, in reality, it may be impossible, and likely inadvisable, to ignore intuitive decision-making and the flexibility to change course with new opportunities.

### **Post-secondary Student Career Decision-making**

While much has been written about students' career development needs and the interventions and services to help, not much is known about the real-life process by which students come to career decisions. I will describe models of student decision-making and the small amount of research that has asked students about their CDM experience.

An early model of student career decision-making was developed by Harren (1979). This model describes the CDM of "typical aged" undergraduates (under twenty-five years old) and addressed not only the decision-making process, but also the decision-maker characteristics, tasks, and conditions which influence CDM. Decision-making was described as a four stage sequential, linear process of awareness, planning, commitment, and then implementation. It was influenced by three categories of decision-making styles: rational, intuitive, and dependant. As the names suggest, the rational style is characterized by a

deliberate and logical evaluation of information to make a realistic decision. Intuitive decision-makers are praised for taking charge of their own decision-making as in the rational style, but their reliance on the use of fantasy and emotional self-awareness are said to result in less effective decisions due to fluctuations of internal states. The dependant style is described as projecting responsibility for the decision by seeking the approval of authorities and peers which ultimately leads to less personally satisfying career decisions. A similar taxonomy of student decision-making styles was described by Johnsonn (as cited in Niles, 2005) and labeled decision-makers as systematic or spontaneous and internal or external. In a research study, Niles et al. (as cited in Niles, 2005) notes that students who use a systematic and external style (proceed logically and talk to others) were most advanced and confident in their career development. Many common career development interventions for students seem to be of most benefit to the rational decision-maker (Whiston, 2000).

Studies which used qualitative methods to investigate the ways students make decisions present a different view. The CDM process that emerges is more iterative, intuitional, and experiential with both internal and external factors taken into account. A recent study by Bubany, Krieshok, Black, and McKay (2008), used mixed methods to examine how college students discussed their CDM approach in comparison to various CDM models. They found the results consistent with alternative (other-than-rational) decision-making models. Students indicated that they valued a decision-making style focused on interdependence, experiences, intuition, and emotions. Others, often immediate family members, played an important role in their decision-making. Half of the participants indicated that work or academic experiences were important as well, and that these enable one to make an intuitive decision. Incorporating personal interests were also frequently

mentioned. While this study is useful in presenting students' perspectives, I believe it is limited by a small sample size (only 20 students, ages 18 – 21) and the brief format of the interviews (conducted by phone and designed to last only 5 – 10 minutes).

Two other studies looked at student CDM processes. Brown (2004) conducted qualitative interviews with eighteen recently graduated liberal arts undergraduates to understand their post-college CDM. He found that participants came to their decisions through, "...an ongoing, iterative and often non-linear process" that could include: taking stock, developing decision-making criteria, making on-board adjustments, connecting to opportunities, narrowing options, and making a decision (Brown, 2004, p. 377). The conditions which influenced their decision-making process were both internal (orientation to learning) and external (interaction with others and experiences). Lent et al. (2002) also found that personal and contextual factors were important considerations in making a career choice. A mixture of undergraduates and graduate students at a university and technical college (n = 31, ages 19 - 26) participated in structured interviews. The most common factors influencing their expected career choice were the personal factors of interests, values, and abilities and contextual factors such as direct and vicarious exposure to work-relevant activities. Interestingly, social and family influences were not frequently mentioned, nor were career counselling activities. Unfortunately, the process by which students came to decisions was not explored.

While these recent qualitative studies seem to indicate that the real-life decision-making of students involves a number of factors that go beyond the traditional models of rational decision-making, this research mainly looked at the CDM of a small group of

traditionally-aged students enrolled in undergraduate studies and may not be relevant for graduate students.

**Non-traditional Student Career Development.** According to a recent government report on the age of students at twenty-one BC post-secondary institutions, 60 % are between the ages of 25 – 99 (Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development, 2010). These non-traditional students differ from younger students in a number of ways. Often they have work, family, and community responsibilities outside of the post-secondary environment. They may take a more instrumental orientation to their education and are less concerned about integration into the institution (Luzzo, 2000). Their life circumstances likely lead to different factors being considered in the decision to return to post-secondary studies and the implementation of that decision.

Despite the substantial numbers of adults returning to university, a review of the literature to date has yet to show any qualitative studies addressing the CDM of non-traditional students or graduate students. Luzzo (1993, 1999, 2000), however, has provided a good summary of the mixed results of research on the career development needs of non-traditional students. As is expected by developmental models of career development, the needs of non-traditional students are different from their younger counterparts. They have been shown to have more mature CDM attitudes, including less anxiety and fear, which emotionally prepare them to engage effectively in CDM activities. Non-traditional students also have more skills related to CDM and enter studies with more information about the CDM process and their needs within it. They are also typically more committed to their identified career choice. This could lead the career professional to assume non-traditional students have few needs for career assistance. In fact, while mature students may be

somewhat more prepared for CDM than traditional-aged students, Luzzo (1999) notes that they are only somewhat more likely to have confidence in their ability to engage in the CDM process, also known as CDM self-efficacy. Non-traditional students also perceive more barriers to their occupational goals and state a greater need for occupational information. From this, a picture emerges of students who may have had more career development experience, but who feel uncertain in their ability to meet the challenge of future career change. Super's (1984) developmental CDM model supports this notion. While traditionally aged students would fit into the life stage of exploration, mature students would be in the establishment stage. However, in returning to studies, they are recycling to the previous stage in a "minicycle" and so naturally would resume some exploration of alternatives while bringing knowledge from previous career development experience.

**Graduate Student Career Development.** As with non-traditional students, the CDM process of graduate students has not been well studied. The literature does, however, shed light on some reported reasons why people choose to go to graduate school. These are likely factors that are considered in the career decision-making process. These factors include the desire for better job opportunities, to make a career or academic discipline change, to delay a career decision or entry into the labour market, and to fulfill the inevitable next step in post-secondary education. More than one factor could be part of the decision to attend graduate school.

Choosing to pursue studies as a way to enhance one's job opportunities and earning potential is noted as a motivating factor for both mature students and graduate students (Luzzo, 2000). For graduate students who are also mature students, having greater financial and family responsibilities are part of this decision. However, even traditional-aged students



are concerned about their job prospects without a graduate degree. While many professional careers may require specialized training for entry, it is also commonly assumed that one needs a graduate degree to be competitive in the job market, which is not always the case (“Chapter 2: Decision to Attend Graduate School,” 2000; Luzzo, 2000). Some workers do decide to return to post-secondary education because they experience limitations in the labour market. In a qualitative study of twenty-four British master’s students, Bowman (2005) characterized one subsection of the students interviewed as engaging in a career transition of “coming back”. These students chose to pursue a master’s degree because they were frustrated they could not get into the jobs they wanted or were dissatisfied with the jobs they were able to get with their undergraduate studies. These students saw a master’s degree as a way to exit the labour market and return to it with better, more satisfying job options. Another subset of her participants, who were labeled “moving on”, were also motivated by dissatisfaction. These students were moving directly from undergraduate studies to a new field because they wanted to study something different and more personally rewarding.

Other students proceed directly from undergraduate to graduate studies because they want to remain on the same path. For students who select an occupation early in life, graduate study is simply an inevitable step to entering their chosen career (“Chapter 2: Decision to Attend Graduate School,” 2000). Some students in this situation may delay entry for financial or family considerations, but their career plan is established. In the study by Bowman (2005), she labeled the career transitions of such students as “staying on”. She notes, “The students who were ‘staying on’ had a sense of continuing their studies as a ‘logical progression’ or ‘natural extension’ of their first degree.” She also suggests that for some of these students, entering a master’s program in their same institution allowed them to

continue their existing student lifestyle and was more of a “non-decision”. Another study seems to confirm this notion. Ethington & Smart (1986) found that the primary influence on the decision to enroll in graduate school was the extent of student integration into the social and academic system of the institution.

It has also been suggested that some students enter a master’s degree program to delay their career decision-making or entry into “the real world”. This could reflect a realistic assessment of their readiness to select an occupation or it could be due to more generalized inability to make commitments (“Chapter 2: Decision to Attend Graduate School,” 2000). Luzzo (2000) suggests that a significant proportion of students enter graduate school with unclear occupational goals and use their studies more as a way to explore their options than as a way to achieve a previously chosen career path. Still others may be using it to crystallize their career decision.

**Counselling Student Career Development.** Despite an extensive review of the current literature, I could find very little research addressing the career development of counselling students and no investigations of the career decision-making process of those who choose to study a master’s in counselling psychology degree specifically. I will review two studies that shed some light on the career development needs of counselling students and a narrative inquiry into the career choice of students who chose to study a Master of Social Work degree, a discipline similar to counselling.

In terms of counselling students’ career development, one Western Canadian study is of particular interest. Wiesenberg and Aghakhani (2007) investigated the career transition experience of graduate students in counselling and education as they moved through their program. While they did not enquire about the period of deciding to pursue graduate studies,

they did ask students to comment on how several factors influenced them at the entry point of their master's program. They were particularly interested in the influence of gender, family, culture, social supports, educational institution, and workplace on their transition experience. Their finding that each one of these factors had helping and hindering impacts on the students' transition experiences seems to suggest that external factors play an important role in counselling students' career development. It is my view that this might indicate that these were influences on the initial decision to study counselling as well. The ability to draw conclusions from the findings of this survey is limited for there was a small sample (30 respondents) and only 29% of the respondents were counselling students.

Another study suggests that counselling students' career decision-making does not end upon entry into their master's degree studies. Busacca and Wester (2006) surveyed over 150 master's-level counsellor trainees and found that they expressed career development needs at both Super's exploration and establishment stages of career development. Specifically, students reported the need to acquire information about themselves and occupations, as well as a concern about establishing themselves in the counselling profession. Interestingly, minimal job search concerns were reported, perhaps because students had already participated in the labour market prior to their studies. While this does not shed light on the CDM process that led up to the decision to begin a master's in counselling degree, it does suggest that students do not view this decision as the end of their CDM process. This also aligns with the research that suggests that not all students enter graduate school with clearly defined occupational goals. Both studies note that given the limited information about the career development of master's-level counsellor trainees, more research is needed in this area. This observation suggests my study may be useful in this regard.

One investigation into the career choice of social work students is similar to my study. Mensinga (2005) used a narrative inquiry approach in her master's thesis to describe the process by which three social work master's students came to understand their motivations and identity within the profession. She found that while individual traits (such as the value of caring) were part of the career choice process, her participants engaged in a complex, unfolding process in which they also took into account gendered expectations from family, community and professional sectors. This indicates that the CDM stories of counselling master's degree students may also be multi-layered and involve both individual and social influences.

**Positive Psychology Perspective.** The participants in my research study were successful in gaining entry to their master's degree program, while there are other people who also made the decision to study counselling but who were not accepted into a program. By choosing to study those who found success, I am taking a positive psychology perspective. Positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) focuses on positive human functioning by investigating factors such as strengths and resilience that allow people to flourish. This study further adds to the qualitative literature on those doing well in their career development.

### **Motivation to Choose a Counselling Career**

In investigating the CDM experiences of master's in counselling psychology students, my participants' stories described not only how they came to their decision, but also why they made the decision to study counselling specifically. The question of why people choose to become counsellors (or psychologists, psychiatrists or other therapists) has been the

subject of much writing over the years, often from a psychodynamic perspective. Motivations were often shared through the retrospective reflections of long-term practitioners.

To summarize what is known in this area, I will draw from a very comprehensive review of clinical and empirical literature on the career motivations of psychotherapists conducted by Farber et al. (2005). In this article and the additional literature reviewed, there were several common themes of motivational factors: early experiences, desire for self-healing, psychological-mindedness, influence of mentors, and potential rewards. I will summarize the key points for each factor.

**Early Experiences.** Many authors contend that therapists experience more pain in childhood than the average person and these experiences lead them to a helping-oriented occupational choice. These childhood difficulties can sensitize them to others' suffering or lead them to unconsciously seek self-healing through providing therapy to others. (Farber et al., 2005; Goodyear, Wertheimer, Cypers, & Rosemond, 2003). There is some research that suggests helpers have more difficult early lives. For example, Fussell and Bonney (1990) conducted a comparative study of the childhood experiences of psychotherapists and physicists. They found that of the professionals who responded to their survey, the psychotherapists reported a high incidence of childhood trauma and emotional deprivation in comparison with the physicists. A study by DiCaccvo (2002) investigated the influence of early caretaking roles in the family. They found that trainee counselling students reported less parental care, more parental control, more parent caretaking responsibilities, and more self-efficacy towards helping than a comparison group of art students. This suggests that those who choose counselling studies may have had difficult family experiences and learned to become caretakers early in life.

Roe (1957) suggested that early parenting experiences influence career choice. Specifically, she indicates that people have a basic orientation either “towards” people or “not towards” people which develops from one of three parental styles: parental emotional concentration (overprotective or over demanding), avoidance of the child (rejecting or neglecting) and acceptance of the child (loving or casual). In contrast to the view that therapists had difficult parenting experiences, people in “service” careers such as psychotherapy are associated with parental acceptance and some overprotection in parenting (Farber et al., 2005).

**Self-healing.** Linked to the idea that counsellors may have difficult early experiences is the notion of the “wounded healer”. This concept suggests that helpers are motivated, often unconsciously, to provide therapy to others in order to address their unmet emotional needs (Sedgwick, 1994). These needs can vary from the desire to be rewarded for caretaking (especially when one was an unacknowledged early parental caretaker) to the need to feel intimately connected to others. As much of the discussion around “wounded healers” comes from psychodynamic perspectives, there is also an emphasis on unconscious motivations such as power, sex, and narcissism (Farber et al., 2005) and the subsequent issues with counter-transference (Sedgwick, 1994). Addressing the fact many counsellors explain their prime career motivation as a desire to “help people”, Barnett (2007) encourages counsellor trainees to consider the origins of this desire and to acknowledge how the “shadow side of altruism” impacts what happens in therapy.

However, the fact many counsellors have had emotional traumas in their lives may be less important than how they have dealt with them. Gaining awareness of one’s own needs and engaging in personal therapy are suggested for new counselling trainees (Barnett, 2007).

A qualitative study of psychotherapists with past histories of psychiatric hospitalization found that the therapists reported challenges with counter-transference, but that their own experiences also increased their therapeutic success through increased empathy and belief in recovery (Cain, 2000). Faber et al. (2005) come to a similar conclusion when they state:

The notion of the ‘wounded healer’ further suggests that through personal suffering and internal conflict, the therapist becomes psychologically aware, and that awareness enables him or her to understand and help others. In this regard, the therapist is much like a shaman – both are capable of healing precisely because of their awareness of personal suffering. (p. 1014).

Nevertheless, the author also reminds us that not all wounded people become healers and not all healers are wounded (Farber et al., 2005).

**Psychological-mindedness.** Another possible motivating factor for pursuing the study of counselling is a natural interest in human behaviour. According to Farber (1985), psychological-mindedness is, “the disposition to reflect upon the meaning and motivation of behaviour, thoughts, and feelings in oneself or other“ (p.170). It could be inborn or a result of early experiences. Those with this trait in adolescence may have found themselves serving as confidants to friends and family and may have been recognized as especially sensitive and caring. Regardless, it should be no surprise that those who are attracted to psychotherapy are generally psychologically minded (Farber, 1985; Farber et al., 2005).

**Mentors.** Many counsellors and other therapists identify important people who influenced their career decision through encouragement and guidance. These influential figures may include a role model that one aspires to emulate or someone who fostered one’s early intellectual interests (Farber et al., 2005). Many leaders in counselling identify their

mentors as family members and teachers (Magnuson, Wilcoxon, & Norem, 2003). One's own personal therapist can also be a mentor. In fact, research summarized by Farber et al. (2005) indicates that while teachers and professors are often most influential in the early stages of CDM, an individual's personal therapist may help confirm the wisdom of this occupational choice.

**Potential Rewards.** Both personal and professional rewards are also important factors in determining if an early interest in the field is pursued (Farber et al., 2005). Research summarized by Farber et al. (2005) indicates that therapists derive great satisfaction from promoting growth in clients and feeling they are making a difference. They also value enhancing their own growth and knowledge. Yet counselling students may be uncomfortable in admitting that they also want to earn a lucrative living and gain public recognition as a respected professional because these intentions are not as highly praised in this field as philanthropic ones (Williams-Nickelson, 2003). Some research indicates that salary and freedom are important considerations in the decision to study counselling. Tipton and White (1988) surveyed 232 first year doctoral students in counselling psychology programs in the United States. The overall results showed that the most influential factors in the decision to study counselling were entrepreneurial interests (prospect of independence and financial reward), motivation to be of service to persons, and the desire to do research in counselling psychology. The freedom to practice independently and in one's own authentic style, yet in a context that also offers a great deal of intimacy, is also appealing (Farber et al., 2005).



### **Chapter 3: Method**

This study explored the career decision-making process of students who are currently pursuing a master's degree in counselling psychology or have recently graduated from a master's in counselling psychology degree program in the Metro Vancouver region of British Columbia. My research question was as follows: What is the experience of making and implementing the decision to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology?

In this section, I outline my research methodology, including the rationale for choosing narrative inquiry. I then describe the procedures used for recruiting participants as well as for collecting and analyzing my data. Lastly, I address my reflexivity as a researcher and the important question of trustworthiness and worth of the findings.

#### **Qualitative Research Paradigm**

An in-depth study of lived experiences, such as individual career decision-making processes, can be best understood through the use of qualitative research methods. As opposed to quantitative studies which seek a means of testing the relationship between variables, "qualitative research focuses on individual meaning and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation" (Creswell, 2009).

According to Polkinghorne (2005), the area to be studied should determine the inquiry method, and qualitative methods are designed to study the area of people's experiential life. It is appropriate to use a qualitative research design when studying an individual or a group and when a detailed understanding of an issue is needed (Creswell, 2007). As such, this method fits well with my intention to illuminate the nuances of student career decision-makers' perspectives through in-depth interviews. There is also support for a qualitative exploration of career topics. It has been stated that, "The process of building a

new understanding of career development must use as its starting point an exploration of people's experiences" (Amundson & Cochran, cited in Amundson & Borgen, 1990, p. 186). As such, I conducted a descriptive, exploratory, and qualitative study of career decision-making.

### **Research Design**

I used the qualitative research method of narrative inquiry to answer my research question. I will first discuss how the epistemological basis of narrative inquiry fits my topic and then I will describe this research method.

Narrative inquiry is one of several narrative research methods which fall under the umbrella of the social constructionist worldview. The assumption of social constructionism is that people actively construct their reality through interaction with others, culture, and history (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1985). This is in contrast to the positivist and post-positivist worldviews which assume there is an external objective reality which can be known. According to Burr (2003), social constructionism also assumes that language is central to the construction process as it provides the basis for thought. She states, "Language produces and constructs our experience of each other and ourselves" (p. 62). Our notion of self is also produced in relation to others. "We have a multiplicity of different selves, each called forth or conjured by our immersion in discourse and in the process of social interaction" (Burr, 2003, p. 141). As a result of these beliefs, social constructionist research is often qualitatively based, with the analysis of language from interview transcripts and other written texts as tools of choice (Burr, 2003).

Assumptions of this worldview have other specific implications for how research is conducted (Crotty, as cited in Creswell, 2009). Since meanings are constructed as people

engage with the world, researchers use open-ended questions for participants to share their views. Also, given that we make sense of the world based on our historical and cultural perspectives, it is important to understand the context and setting of both our participants and ourselves as we conduct research. Lastly, meaning is generated in interaction with others so the process of qualitative research is largely inductive with the inquirer generating meaning from data collected in the field.

This philosophical worldview and resulting research approach was well suited to my topic. The research question necessitated a narrative approach because it deals with the personal construction of past experiences (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). Since experience is not directly observable, we depend on participants' ability to reflect and communicate their stories through the symbols of language (Polkinghorne, 2005). It is natural for people to frame an experience or a process in terms of a story, even if it is not told in a clear temporal sequence. Using the method of narrative inquiry, I gained insight into participants' experiences through their stories. According to Clandinin and Rosiek, "...story is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful" (2006, p. 35). I asked people to tell me the story of their past decision-making, yet as they did so they were recounting the past as seen from this particular time and place and in interaction with me, a student and researcher. It is a narrative produced in a particular setting, for a particular audience, for a particular purpose (Chase, 2005). There is no "true" account of their decision-making experience to reveal. A life story provided in an interview is but one instance of a life story because the story is always in flux and is affected by the context in which it is narrated (Lieblich, Tuval-

Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). From this perspective, I felt it was important to use a research method which acknowledged the subjective nature of this inquiry.

Narrative research follows from social constructionism in that it assumes there is neither a single, absolute truth in human reality nor one correct reading or interpretation of a text. It advocates pluralism, relativism and subjectivity (Lieblich et al., 1998). The commonality between narrative research methods is the study of stories or descriptions of a sequence of events as well as the assumption that story is a fundamental unit that accounts for human experience. For narrative inquiry specifically, the narrative is both the method and the phenomenon of study, an idea put forward by Polkinghorne (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006). Solicited life stories become the material for analysis. This approach fits naturally with my study of lived experience because people are storytellers by nature. Stories allow us to structure our experiences and present our inner reality to an outside world, yet they also shape and construct the narrator's reality (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 1993). Individuals become the narratives they tell about their lives. As described by two well-known narrative inquiry researchers, "In essence, narrative inquiry involves the reconstruction of a person's experience in relationship both to the other and to a social milieu" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 49).

Narrative inquiry was useful in the study of the experience of deciding to pursue a master's in counselling degree for several reasons. First and foremost, this method was well suited to provide a view into the subjective lives of participants and to reveal how their personal meaning making and social context influenced their decision to pursue a master's program in counselling. As previously discussed, an in-depth, qualitative account of career decision-makers is lacking in career counselling literature. Narrative research methods are

also not often utilized in this area. Viewing the decision-making experience through a narrative lens shed new light on this topic.

Narrative research is also useful in the investigation of specific periods of transitions in the life cycle (Lieblich et al., 1998). The decision to attend graduate school can be considered a life transition. Regardless if a person is returning to studies after working or progressing directly from undergraduate studies, they are taking on a new role as a graduate student. Transitions can be conceptualized as having a beginning, middle and end (Bridges, 2004) much as a narrative is structured.

A narrative method also fits for the study of educational and occupational choice. People naturally use stories to frame their lives. Life and career discussion can never be separated as work life coexists with other aspects of personal and social lives (Chen, 2002). I agree with Mensinga (2009, p. 194) who summarizes, “ A narrative understanding of career choice purports that the meaning making process in which an individual engages to explain their career preference reveals much about their personal and social context and the time and the place the decision is made and then told about” (p. 194). She successfully used narrative inquiry to study social workers’ occupational choice, leading me to see the potential of this method to be effective in the study of counselling as a choice of master’s degree.

## **Procedures**

**Participants.** A purposeful sample of eight adults formed the participants for my research study. Two participants were about to begin the first year of their master’s in counselling psychology degree in September 2011, three participants were currently completing a master’s degree in counselling psychology program and three participants had recently (within the past year) graduated with a master’s in counselling psychology degree.

Purposeful sampling is common in qualitative research where researchers seek “information rich” cases to provide the greatest insight into the research question (Devers & Frankel, 2000).

Students had to meet these criteria in order to participate in the study: be currently enrolled in a Master of Counselling Psychology program (M.Ed or M.A.) in the Metro Vancouver region of British Columbia (excluding UBC) or have recently graduated (within the past year) from a Master of Counselling Psychology program (M.Ed or M.A.) in the Metro Vancouver region of British Columbia (excluding UBC).

These criteria enabled me to interview students from various master’s-level counselling psychology programs outside of my own program, allowing for diversity of narratives and minimizing dual relationship and confidentiality issues. I took a number of steps to safeguard my participants from these issues and other potential ethical concerns. A multiple relationship occurs in research when the researcher has a secondary relationship with a participant outside of the research context. I did not previously know any of my research participants but, as we were studying in the same field, there was a chance we could become colleagues or interact in future professional settings. As a result, during the screening interview, I mentioned this possibility and how disclosures during the research interview could potentially lead to discomfort in later interactions. I also verbally restated my commitment to maintaining confidentiality should this scenario arise. My research procedures also demonstrated a commitment to confidentiality. Electronic data was kept secure and separate from participant names. Each participant chose a pseudonym and was asked to ensure enough identifying information had been removed from their final narrative account. I was also aware of the possibility of harm from the experience of sharing life

events. Each participant was given a list of local counselling resources in the event that participation in the interview brought up personal difficulties. In situations where participants became emotional in speaking about their experiences, I responded sensitively by giving space and time for the participant to resume the interview if and when they were ready.

Participants ranged in age from twenty-two years old to fifty-two years old, with an average age of thirty-two. There were seven female participants and one male participant. The following table summarizes other characteristics of study participants as self-reported on their demographic questionnaire:

Table 1: Demographic Information

|                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Ethnic origin                      | Chinese (2), Caucasian (6)  |
| Degree sought and year of program  | MA 1 <sup>st</sup> year (2), MA 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year (1), MA 3 <sup>rd</sup> year (2), M.Ed completed (2), M.A. completed (1)   |
| Previous degree(s)                 | BSc. Applied Psychology (1), B.A. Psychology (4), BSc. Biology (1), M.A. Theatre (1), B.A. Music (1)  |
| Current and previous occupation(s) | Youth Counsellor, Youth Worker, Residential Coordinator, Counsellor (3), Tutor, Teacher (2), Teaching Assistant or Research Assistant (2), Crisis Centre Worker, Actress, Music Coordinator, Group Facilitator, Worker with Persons with a Disability (3), Server, Bartender, Office Manger |

**Recruitment.** Participants were invited to participate in the research primarily via an e-mail I sent to Metro Vancouver universities with master’s-level counselling degree programs (see Appendix A). Faculty members or program administrators passed on this e-mail to group listserv e-mail lists for current students and alumni. Snowball sampling was

also used through research participants who informed fellow students about the study. From my initial e-mail inquiry, I received responses from over twenty-five interested students. The eight participants were chosen based mainly on schedule availability and by variety in demographic characteristics. While there was no intent to create a sample to represent counselling students as a whole or to represent by gender, age, or ethnic background, it was important to provide the opportunity for diverse voices to be represented in my research.

There is no prescribed number of participants recommended for narrative inquiry research. The number of participants necessary for narrative research is inversely proportional to the intensiveness of the study (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). As I conducted in-depth interviews that generated a lot of narrative data, much was gained from a small number of participants. I proposed to interview between six to nine participants and my total number of participants was eight. I stopped recruitment after assessing I had gathered enough data to “represent the richness and diversity of the phenomenon” (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). My initial review of the research transcripts and discussions with research committee members indicated that I had an appropriate number of participants to produce robust cross-narrative themes.

### **Data Collection**

Potential participants were contacted by phone for an initial screening conversation. During this call, I confirmed that they fit the inclusion criteria, shared the purpose of the study, the time commitment involved, issues of confidentiality, and asked if they had any immediate questions about the consent form (see Appendix B). The consent form was sent via e-mail for their review prior to the screening call. Scheduling of the in-person interview was done by e-mail after the screening call to give the participant additional time to consider



their commitment to participate. Interviews were scheduled for approximately one to two weeks after the screening call so participants had an opportunity to complete two pre-interview activities: to create a timeline of their decision-making and to consider a metaphor of their experience, both which would be discussed in the interview. Seven participant interviews were held in private study rooms at various university campuses or public libraries. In one instance, I interviewed a participant in her home.

I began the in-person interview by building rapport and ensuring the participant was fully informed about the research process. They were given time to once again review and ask questions about the consent form and then all participants were given a list of local counselling referrals if needed for post-interview support. They also received a gift card as a thank you for their participation. The audiotaped interview began once the consent form was signed, the one-page demographic questionnaire was completed (see Appendix C) and the introduction to my interview guide was read verbatim so all participants had similar instructions (see Appendix D).

This one semi-structured, digitally audiotaped interview was my main means of data collection. Interviews ranged in length from forty-two minutes to two hours, with the average length being about one hour. The purpose of the research interview was to give a space and time for the participant to tell the story of their experience. However, as the interviewer, my presence and involvement (in terms of how I listened and responded) made the story a joint production (Polkinghorne, 2005).

I began with the same open ended-interview question for all participants, “Please tell me the story of your decision-making to pursue a master’s in counselling psychology degree.” An open and conversational interviewing style is important because narrative

research acknowledges that the interviewer's approach will influence what participants tell about important moments in their lives (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 1993). This open question also gave participants the freedom to begin their story wherever it felt most natural for them. Riessman (1993) encourages narrative researchers to ask questions which open up topics and allow respondents to construct answers in collaboration with listeners, in the ways they find meaningful. From there, I used follow up questions and probes to expand on details (see Appendix D for examples). My questions were not limited to those listed in the interview guide as each narrative had different areas to be explored. I kept in mind that what my participants saw as "story-worthy" was sometimes different from what I initially conceptualized (Chase, 2005) and followed the participants' lead in terms of how their story unfolded.

While I did my best to take an open, non-directive approach in the interview, I also asked questions to ensure we stayed focused on areas relevant to the research question. Often my questions were probing to go beyond the "what" (events) of the experience to get at the "how" (process) or "why" (motivation) of decision-making and implementation. I also often used summarizing statements and probing questions to confirm that my understanding of their story fit their intended meaning. Chen (2002) notes that in facilitating a career narrative, the goal is not just to describe events but also to present their coherent development. This sometimes requires a co-structor to facilitate interpretation during the narration process.

We also used their pre-prepared timeline to help guide the story of their experience, although we commonly did not talk about the content in a chronological sequence. All participants brought a copy of their timeline to their interview and one participant sent it to me in advance. I introduced this activity during our screening phone call and scheduling e-

mail as a way to start to reflect on past experiences. I let participants know there was no one right way to complete the timeline, but often people began at birth and went to present day, noting anything at a time of life (events, feelings, people, locations, realizations, etc.) that influenced their decision to study counselling psychology and the implementation of that decision. A timeline analysis activity is a technique from career counselling which can help clients recall and explore the significance of important life events (Heppner, O'Brien, Hinkelman, & Humphrey, 1994). Several participants commented that the timeline was a useful exercise and it helped them have a deeper understanding of how past events fit together.

Towards the end of the interview, I also asked all participants how they would describe their decision-making experience in the form of a metaphor or image. Metaphors are a natural fit with a narrative meaning making process (Amundson, 2009). During the first two interviews, I asked participants this question as one of the follow up questions (see Appendix D) without giving time for preparation prior to the interview. After receiving participant feedback that additional time to reflect on this question would have been helpful, I asked subsequent participants to consider this before we met.

I also wrote in my research journal both before and after each interview. This process was a way for me to remain aware of any factors that I felt might be influencing the research data. As noted by Polkinghorne (2005), “an account that is authentically the participant’s description depends on the integrity of the interviewers and their awareness of their own propensities to generate accounts that match their own expectations” (p.138). Before the interview, I journaled reminders to remain open and focused and checked in on my feelings. After the interview, I captured my impressions of the interview and ways I may have led the

story or otherwise influenced the interview process. This allowed me to refine my interview technique as I went along and stay aware of my biases. I also listed my initial impressions of themes that seemed to be emerging so I could refer back to this during data analysis and have a “track” of where my ideas were coming from. This is similar to Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) process of an “audit trail”.

## **Data Analysis**

**Initial Data Analysis.** Transcription of the audio-recorded interviews was the first level of data analysis. I transcribed one interview myself. Due to time constraints, the remaining seven interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. All transcripts used the same format and key for indicating verbal emphasis, utterances (such as “um”) and non-verbal behaviours. I checked all transcripts for accuracy and added any missed words or utterances. Interview transcripts were between thirteen to twenty pages long and labeled by participant number rather than name to maintain confidentiality. While I endeavoured to produce transcripts which were as representative of the interview as possible, transcription does include some interpretation. The exact reproduction of the act of speech is impossible so the transcription inevitably includes the researcher’s assumptions about what is important (Arvay, 2003). Choices such as how the text is displayed or tone and silences denoted guides us to particular interpretations like a photographer’s lens guides us to different aspects of a picture (Riessman, 1993).

I then began to focus on the individual narratives. Following the holistic- content approach as described by Leiblich et al. (1998), I started with a global reading to gain an overall understanding of story content and themes. Through close listening to the interviews and re-reading of transcripts, I became intimately familiar with the interview data of each

participant and began to form impressions of similarities and differences between participant stories. This process can lead to initial insights into how to re-story interview narratives (Riessman, 1993) and help to piece together meanings in the later analysis (Fraser, 2004).

Next, I engaged in the process of “restorying” to create a narrative account for each participant. This process included gathering stories, analysing their key elements and then rewriting the story in a chronological sequence to provide a causal link among ideas and rich detail of the setting or context of the experience (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The process unfolded in the following way. For each transcript, I highlighted all parts of the transcript relevant to the research question. These sentences were then ordered chronologically to create the basis for the participants’ “story”, a narrative account of their experience of making and implementing their decision to pursue a master’s degree in counselling psychology from earliest events to present day. As much as possible, the participants’ exact words were used in creating the narrative account. I added a paragraph to introduce the participant, edited to condense large sections of text, and added connecting words or sentences to create a coherent flow. Told in the first person, I wanted the participant to relate to this retelling of their personal or social experiences related to the research question. I made notes in my research journal throughout the process of creating the narrative accounts, reflecting on ways I might have influenced the presentation of participants stories and to remain aware of my continued role as a co-constructor of their narratives outside of the interview room.

**Participant Verification.** A draft narrative account was sent to each participant for their review. This member check process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is important to ensure the participant has the opportunity to comment on the credibility of the representation of their

experience. It was important to me to offer a check to ensure that the voice of the researcher had not overshadowed that of the research participant and misinterpreted their story. If the participant agrees the account is an adequate representation, the credibility of the account is increased (Riessman, 1993). As agreed when we met for our interview, I e-mailed the account to each participant and I asked them to consider if it was an accurate representation of their experience as told when we met. As all participants had university-level communication skills, I felt it was possible to get adequate feedback without having to meet again in person. I encouraged them to add, delete, or change any parts of the narrative that did not fit or should be excluded to increase anonymity. I also asked them to choose a pseudonym by which they could be referred (see Appendix E for the e-mail requesting their feedback). All participants sent back edited narratives. Most changes were relatively minor and included adding content to clarify a statement, changing wording, or altering additional information to protect their identity. All requested changes were implemented to create the final narrative accounts included in the Findings section (Chapter 4) of this thesis.

**Cross-narrative Thematic Analysis.** The participant checked narrative accounts were used for the second level of data analysis. I utilized the analysis framework described by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998). They describe different possible approaches for reading and analysing narrative data along two dimensions: holistic versus categorical and content versus form. The holistic versus categorical dimension refers to the unit of analysis. A holistic approach takes sections of the text and interprets them in the context of other parts of that narrative, while a categorical approach collects specific categories of sections or words from several texts (Lieblich et al., 1998). The content versus form dimension refers to how the text is read. As described by Lieblich et al. (1998), in a content

approach, the researcher concentrates on the explicit content of the narrative such as what happened and who participated. Implicit content can also be examined by asking the meaning of a section of story. A reading focused on form ignores the content of the story to investigate the structure, sequencing, feelings, style, and metaphors in the narrative account.

The purpose of the research largely determines the dimension of analysis to be used. Categorical analysis is used when the purpose is to explore a particular phenomenon across several texts while holistic analysis can provide a global understanding of a person's development over time (Lieblich et al., 1998; Mensinga, 2009). Given my aim to explore career decision-making accounts across texts as well as within a particular participant's development, I used both dimensions in my analysis. Likewise, my proposed research focus is more aligned to analysis of the explicit and implicit content of the stories as opposed to the form, or how the story was told, so I focused on content.

The participant-checked narratives formed the "content universe of the area studied" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 112) for the categorical-content analysis of the data. Instead of searching for predetermined categories, I used the strategy described by Lieblich et al. (1998) to, "read the subtext as openly as possible and to define the major content categories that emerge from the reading" (p. 113). Words, sentences, or groups of sentences were highlighted in different colours to sort them into different categories. New categories were added with each subsequent coded narrative and categories refined as similar content was identified. This was a circular procedure that involved careful reading and refinement of categories (Lieblich et al., 1998). Once an initial list of categories emerged, each narrative was reviewed again and adjustments made. Several sections of text were re-categorized, a few similar categories were combined, and two categories were deleted because they applied

to only one or two participants. Text of participant narrative accounts was coded into a total of sixty-three content categories.

As I completed categorical coding of each narrative account, I also once again looked at the narratives from a holistic-content perspective. Specifically, I asked myself what impression each narrative left on me and what struck me about what was said and what was not said. I noted two to four major themes that seemed to be repeated within each individual's story. I compared this holistic impression to the content categories to see if any additional categories emerged or should be refined. Looking at the holistic themes also helped me to see cross-narrative themes.

The large number of content categories were grouped by similarity to create cross-narrative themes to describe the data. Each cross-narrative theme was applicable to at least five of eight participants. I initially had fifteen themes, but I was able to combine similar themes to arrive at a total of thirteen. For each theme, I went back to the original transcript to locate a quote from a coded participant that demonstrated this theme. If a relevant quote was not evident, coding was changed. This process acted as an additional way to ensure that my themes were grounded in the participants' description of their experience more so than my interpretation of their experience. A detailed description of each theme is located in the Findings section (Chapter 4).

Throughout this process, I was aware of the possibility of bias in defining categories and themes to fit pre-conceived ideas about the research question. As a result, I continued reflexive journaling during the data analysis. I noted any interview questions that may have led to the prominence of particular themes over others. I also referred back to any expectations I had about the themes that would emerge based on my own experiences and my



review of relevant literature. While many themes were not surprising, the existence of unexpected themes may indicate that my approach to data collection and analysis left openness to a variety of participant experiences. As described next, the expert review and participant member check of themes adds additional credibility to the data interpretation.

**Expert Review and Participant Check of Themes.** I asked two researchers familiar with narrative methods to check my thematic coding and themes. This check was intended to act as a guard against bias and open up additional perspectives and interpretations of the data (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). Their feedback indicated that my themes made sense and seemed to demonstrate the elements included in the career counselling process. No adjustments in the themes were suggested.

I also sent each participant a list of themes relevant to their narrative for their feedback. This was meant to ensure my interpretations were not overly biased towards my expected results. I asked participants to share if they felt the themes were comprehensive, if they resonated with their experience, and if they had pragmatic value for the field of counselling psychology. The e-mails sent to participants are included as Appendix F. I received a response from all eight participants. Almost all participants noted that the themes fit well with their narrative. Some noted possible additions or reorganization to the themes or noted which themes corresponded to their narratives more than others did. Comments included, “This encompasses exactly what was covered in our interview and in my narrative” and, “I was surprised by the number of the themes I was not even aware of, but they all fit well.” Feedback from one participant about a theme she felt did not correspond to her narrative led me to adjust my analysis of the data. Another participant noted that she felt, “...my personal narrative only made up a small proportion of all the cross-narrative themes

that have come up. However, I can't think of any other themes to draw from my own narrative.” Nevertheless, this participant did feel that many of the themes resonated with her.

All participants commented on feeling resonance with the themes. A participant also remarked, “...I think they will resonate with many students who chose counselling psychology as their career.” Three participants were interested in the meaning of commonalities between counselling students. One participant noted that this might indicate there is a, “...certain quality in people who pursue this line of work.”, while another shared that we seem to share “common factors”.

All participants also endorsed the pragmatic value of the themes. They offered interesting perspectives on the way this research could be helpful to the field of counselling and to potential counselling students. One participant noted that it is important to see that choosing a career is interconnected with all other aspects of living. Several participants shared thoughts for potential counselling students to consider. One participant shared “...the counselling field is one you have to be sure about entering into.” Seeking out experiences was encouraged as a way to test the fit to counselling. Others thought it was important to know the life experiences and motivations that make a “good” counsellor, while another encouraged students to realize the amount of “personal work” that needs to be done. The role of others was also mentioned, including the important influence of teachers and an encouragement for students to seek out connections with professors, advisors, and mentors.

### **Researcher's Reflexivity**

It is inevitable that I influenced the research process in some way. As stated by Malterud (2001), "A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose,

the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions" (p.483). I chose a narrative method for my research in part because I feel strongly about the importance of locating myself in the research as a co-constructor of knowledge. Participants' stories may have taken a different form if someone else was the listener (Riessman, 1993).

My position as a current master's student in counselling inevitably means that I came to this research influenced by my own career decision-making experiences and motivations to study counselling. I have outlined my own brief career "narrative" in the section titled Researcher's Subjectivity (Chapter 1). Along with my own experiences of career decision-making, another factor which led me to this research topic was my background as a career development practitioner. I have assisted many people with career exploration and decision-making, generally in short term counselling relationships whereby people were still considering their options when our work together ended. I might eventually learn of their decision weeks or months later, but I was often left wondering about the detailed, personal process that brought them to their conclusion. Specifically, I was curious about the influence of the many factors outside our counselling meetings and wanted to understand how people moved from confusion to action. Through this professional role, I also came to develop assumptions about the career decision-making process. Personal beliefs which I brought to this research included: an assumption that good decisions can be made both intuitively and logically, valuing of heterogeneity in the ways people come to the same decision, and the importance of context in career development.

I also believe that my position as a fellow master's student may have affected the research process. Being a peer may have led to a more open and relaxed interview

conversation. It also may have resulted in the participant holding back elements of their experience or feeling pressure to demonstrate to a fellow student how their decision to enter counselling was warranted, especially if the participant felt any doubt about their choice or capabilities as a master's student or counsellor. Confidentiality and dual relationship concerns could also potentially have restricted the interview data, as discussed earlier. Overall, my interview observations and feedback from participants indicates that these were likely not large factors, but it is important for readers of my research to consider the impact of my role as they review my findings.

I fostered reflexivity throughout my research process in several ways: through journaling and self-reflection, by using participant checks and expert reviews to check my data interpretations, and in transparent reporting of my position and assumptions to readers of my research. At the outset of this study, I spent time documenting my own career narrative and journaling about any hidden hopes for the themes my research would reveal. Clarifying and documenting these biases helped me to maintain vigilance against influencing the interviews or data analysis in favour of confirming these assumptions. I maintained this awareness throughout the research process by keeping a reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I also used several procedures during the data analysis process to ensure my interpretations fit with participants' intended meanings as much as possible. This included referring back to individual transcripts and asking for participant checks of data. Further acknowledging that even the most self-reflective researcher has blind spots, I solicited experts to review my interpretations as another way to challenge my interpretations and to remain open to other ways of viewing the data.

## **Criteria for Trustworthiness and Worth**

I employed a number of procedures to conduct my proposed research in a rigorous manner to produce trustworthy findings. While the traditional concepts of validity and reliability do not apply to qualitative research, Creswell (2009) notes that it is important to establish what he terms “qualitative validity” for the accuracy of findings and “qualitative reliability” to refer to consistency in approach. Narrative researchers have developed several different criteria against which narrative research can be compared. I will use concepts from Rieseaman (1993) and Lieblich et al.(1998) to discuss the trustworthiness and worth of my research.

According to Rieseaman (1993), persuasiveness asks if the interpretation is reasonable and convincing. She goes on to note that, “Persuasiveness is greatest when theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants’ accounts and when alternative interpretations of the data are considered” (p. 65). As previously detailed in my discussion of participants’ feedback of their narratives and cross-narrative themes, there was generally overall agreement with my interpretation and I noted exceptions or alternative views.

Related to this is the concept of width or the comprehensiveness of evidence (Lieblich et al., 1998). This concept asks about the quality of the data collection and interpretations. In my research, I aimed for comprehensiveness by conducting in-depth interviews to explore participant experiences while maintaining a reflexive research journal where I captured additional reflections on the interview process. My analysis has width by providing detailed narrative accounts of each participant and numerous quotes.

Another important concept is correspondence. Correspondence asks if the investigator's reconstructions are recognized by those studied as adequate representations (Riessman, 1993). It involves any procedures that take results back to participants, such as member checks. Credibility of the data is increased if the people from whom the data was collected have a chance to comment on the researcher's work. In my research, each participant edited their narrative account and had a chance to comment on my summary of their story. The changes made by participants were generally small, and several commented that the narratives fit well. One participant stated, "I think you did an absolutely fantastic job. I have made some edits that I feel helped to make it flow nicer and work better altogether." Another noted, "Looks great... the content, meaning and the summary are great." Other participants shared the personal impact of reviewing their narrative. These comments included: "I just want you to know that I read the script and absolutely loved it! It gave me goose bumps actually, as it was so neat hearing my story told back to me! I think you captured me pretty accurately." and, "Thanks for such a good job in summarizing my story! It brought me fresh perspective reading it from your point of view." These participant statements add to the trustworthiness of the researcher-generated narrative accounts and subsequent data analysis based on these narratives.

I aimed for coherence (Riessman, 1993) by using rich, thick description to convey the findings. I have described to the reader the process by which I came to construct the participant narratives and cross-narrative themes. The narrative accounts are presented with enough detail and participant-specific language to give a sense of how the story was conveyed in the research setting. Importantly, discussion of themes includes several interpretations and numerous verbatim quotes to make the raw data visible to the reader and

increase the trustworthiness of the analysis. Providing many details helps the results become more realistic and richer (Creswell, 2009).

Lieblich et al. (1998) use the term coherence in a slightly different way. In their view, this criterion for evaluating narrative studies emphasizes how parts of the interpretation fit together internally as well as how they fit to external theories and research. In my discussion, I note how themes correspond to the existing literature in a number of ways, while expert reviewers familiar with the career development process commented that my themes fit well with the career counselling process.

The pragmatic use of my study is another way to evaluate its worth. For Riessman (1993), this refers to, “the extent to which a particular study becomes the basis for others’ work” (p. 68). It is difficult to anticipate how my research may be used in the future, but I have endeavoured to make my research process transparent for other researchers to evaluate its worthiness. I explicitly described my approach to narrative inquiry and include rich descriptions in the form of narrative accounts and participant quotes to allow readers to make their own analyses. I feel that it is important to note that even if others do not utilize my work in the future, it will have great personal pragmatic value in my work as a career counsellor. It has given me a deeper and more varied understanding of the career decision-making process that will help me to better relate to diverse client situations.

## Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, the findings of my study are presented in two ways: through the narrative accounts of all eight participants and by describing thirteen cross-narrative themes. By representing the results in this way, I hope to allow both the individual and collective richness of the experience of deciding and implementing the decision to study counselling to come through.

As described in the Data Analysis section of Chapter 3, the individual narrative accounts were co-created by the researcher and participants and represent the story of their decision-making experience as described in the research interview. Since participants provided the final edits to these narratives, I have not made substantial changes to the phrasing and spelling they chose to include. I generated thirteen cross-narrative themes through the coding process also described under Data Analysis. They were reviewed by both expert reviewers and participants. These themes are just one possible way the data could have been interpreted and are meant to bring categories into focus to better conceptualize shared aspects of the overall experience.

### Individual Narratives

**Ariel.** My name is Ariel and I am a thirty year old international student in my final year of a counselling postgraduate degree. It was a two-part process to my decision in pursuing a master's degree in counselling psychology. I first considered furthering my education because I felt professionally inadequate in my work as a youth counsellor. Initially focused on getting into the clinical psychology program, I stumbled upon counselling psych midway through my post-baccalaureate diploma in Canada and realized this was a better fit for me.



Looking further back, the first time I remember thinking about what I wanted to be in the future was when I was fifteen or sixteen. A teacher once told me that, “if you love what you do, you will never have to work a single day of your life”. That had a very profound impact on me, and I really started thinking about what I could see myself doing until I was eighty and not be tired of it.

There were probably two main factors that led me into my decision to be in psychology. There was a really popular investigative crime-solving TV series when I was fifteen or sixteen in which I found myself particularly drawn to the character of a female psychologist. For some reason, it was like I could almost see my future self in her; or rather, she was everything I wanted to be. She knows exactly what others were feeling and always seemed to just know the right thing to say. I was just in awe of how intelligent the character seemed to be and her insight on human behaviour. The other factor being my family background; I am the eldest of four girls and also the eldest granddaughter on the paternal side of my family. Being the oldest in this truck load full of siblings and cousins, I always found myself being in the care-giving role. I think THAT<sup>1</sup> probably sparked my interest in child psychology. Also, one of my strongest beliefs is that children deserve to be protected. Not to be deterministic, but I think that the experiences in childhood have a strong influence on one’s chances of doing well in the future. And probably because I had a very happy childhood - I was very well loved and had a lot of freedom; I have fond memories of running around bare-footed, climbing trees, and hiking in the country with my grandfather’s dogs - I feel like everybody should have the chance to have that. I grew up in a village in the country

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<sup>1</sup> Fully-capitalized text denotes words that were verbally emphasized by participants during the interview.

with my extended family close, and in my country's transition to urbanization, I felt that the carefree element of my childhood to be somehow missing in children who grew up in the city. It was pretty much then that I decided that I wanted to be a child psychologist when I grew up. Since then, I've directed my academic and career choices based on my research on what I needed to have before I could be a child psychologist.

I was working towards becoming a psychology major at the local universities but unfortunately I didn't have grades good enough to get into the program in my two attempts at the exams. I was offered alternative programs in education but I decided that I still wanted to do psychology. So, I started my Bachelor of Science as a psych major long distance through an overseas university. At the same time, I was working part-time at a clerical job in an investment bank, which reaffirmed my choice in psychology. This was somewhat ironic because I was an accounting major from fifteen to nineteen years old. But it was more of a parental-influenced choice then, as going to the financial sector was a popular and safe choice for girls at that time. Surprisingly, I don't remember any major objections when I decided to stick to my choice in psychology - which was a more expensive, round-about academic route. I've always felt like I was an exception, even within my family, for that matter. If my parents HAD objected I would have seriously considered something else. I was thankful that they didn't, as I might have been an accountant today.

After graduating at twenty-three, I did well working at an education centre for a year before finding a job as a youth counsellor with a major non-profit organization specializing in care for children. I didn't actually end up working with children as I was in the branch that was specializing in youth-at-risk. It wasn't my first CHOICE, but I found that I enjoyed my work, and I've been somehow continued on working with youths since. But I remember

feeling very inadequate all the time. My degree was science oriented so I basically felt like I knew next to nothing about talking to a person therapeutically. I was constantly unhappy at myself for not knowing how to approach my clients, and I felt like I failed at my job and failed my clients. So one or two years into my job, I started looking around at my options for advancing my education locally, and I realized what was available was not what I was looking for. I needed something that would really make me feel competent, so that when I stepped into a counselling room I knew how to help someone else and not endanger them.

When I was a youth counsellor, I had a mentor and supervisor who became a very close friend. She had gone to school in Canada and we talked for days on end about advancing our education there, so that's where I started looking. I was not the person you would expect to go overseas by myself. If it wasn't for my mentor, I would have never made it to Canada to be honest. She said that I could stay with her family in Vancouver, offer financial support if needed, and was able to help me navigate my way around, not just geographically, but also the way of life. The exact moment that I made the decision was basically one talk that I had with my mentor. I remember thinking it was a once in a lifetime opportunity and if I was going to do it, this would be it. When I spoke to my parents about it, they basically said to go ahead with it as long as I am happy and have given it due consideration.

Usually, I'm a very cautious person by nature. Even with small decisions, especially with money, I will think really carefully; I'll consider many things, pros, cons and that kind of thing. The funny thing is, that when it came to major decisions like my career and deciding to move to Canada it was like, "okay, this is it, this feels right." and I have never looked back since. It was very curious, even to myself, at how quickly and

UNCEREMONIOUSLY I came to that decision, and it's been the right decision. I've never regretted most of my major decisions, and I've always made them like that.

I basically made the decision to come over here a year before I did. Through research, I realized that the odds of getting into a master's program – especially as an overseas applicant – were low, so I decided to start with a post-baccalaureate diploma in the Faculty of Psychology. During which, I realized clinical psych wasn't going to provide me with the training that I was hoping to receive, that human element in therapeutic work. I don't remember exactly how I found out about the counselling psych program in the Faculty of Education. I think one of the psych professors might have mentioned it in a class, or it might have been the result of my searches on the university website. But since my knowledge, I re-directed my courses for getting into the counselling psych program. It is great that I did, because I did well in the pre-requisite classes and actually met my supervisor through one of the courses. She was one of the people in charge of the counselling psych program so I went to her for guidance and about the program and also eventually asked her to be my reference. I got into the program the year that I applied, which was fortunate because that was the only thing I applied for! That's basically how I ended up in counselling psych.

As to how I SUSTAINED the decision, that is something less straightforward. What kept me going was probably the absence of parental objection, and the support and encouragement that I got from friends. There were also my experiences in working with two previous youth clients that stick out in my mind, and in a way continued to reinforce my decision to gain more counselling skills. The experience made me realized how much impact I had as a therapist and from an ethical perspective; how I had to be at my best if I was going to be a child psychologist. It's not easy being an international student; it is a tedious and

expensive way to complete my education. So I often go back to the original motivation of why I wanted to be in psychology and remind myself why I'm doing what I'm doing.

In terms of how the master's in counselling psychology program is fitting for my future plans, in addition to becoming a child psychologist (and in fact that is flexible at this point now) I realized that I want to eventually contribute to the counsellor education back at home. I know that I must not be the only counsellor in Asia who feels inadequately trained. So now that I have the skills, I have a strong sense of - I don't know - patriotism or responsibility to START contributing back to home. That's something I'm thinking about for the distant future and is also one of the reasons why I pursued some work and volunteer positions that allow me to become familiar with what it is like to be an educator in this field.

Two images come to mind to represent the experience of deciding to pursue my master's degree in counselling psychology. The first one is this long and windy mountain road and just as I thought I am done there is another turn and it opens up a different road. The other image is a tree, where I start from the root as a tiny plant, a seed of an idea if you will. It's through water, sunshine and nurturing that I'm growing every day. At first it seems the only way to grow is UP but then as we get into the branches, I feel every step I take opens up a whole possibility. I look back and I think about all of these so-called FAILURES, and I feel like every step, or MISSTEP that I took, led me to something else that eventually worked out. They were the mistakes that were meant to be. I know that whichever path I take will ultimately turn out to be a rich fruitful tree. In a way, I feel like I'm growing leaves and fruits which will one day be ready to nurture others. The possibilities are endless; the fruit can nourish others and the seedlings could spread far and wide, and multiply. This metaphor feels right.

**Aila.** My name is Aila. I'm twenty-two years old and beginning my master's in counselling psychology degree in September 2011. This is my story of how I decided to pursue this degree and what I did to get there.

I almost feel like I was just born to do this. It's such a funny thing to say, but I've always known that this is what I wanted to do, so the things I have done were not realization factors for me, they were just confirmation. I was set on my goals pretty early. In grade nine, I remember writing in my journal, which was my way of dealing with things, that my lifelong goal of becoming a psychologist was on its way after someone had come to me with their problems again. As a victim of bullying from grades four to eight, I understood feeling of helplessness all too well. By grade nine I started to notice that people came to me because I was one of the only ones that would listen. I've always been the person that people come to talk to, always, and I feel like I've always been a better listener than others.

I became acquainted with psychologists and counsellors throughout high school. I saw my first psychologist when I was thirteen because I was a bit of a trouble-maker and it began causing friction in my parent's marriage. I refused to see this psychologist (and the two after him) because I DIDN'T like the way I felt during our sessions. I decided I wanted to be a counsellor that made people feel comfortable. It was also around this same time that a girl from my school committed suicide. The fact that someone could take their life at such a young age was gut wrenching. I could not stop thinking about ways it could've been prevented, like if she had a counsellor to talk to.

I went to counselling again about a year later as I was suffering after my parents divorced. This counsellor was FANTASTIC and I still see her to this day. She was young and I instantly related to her, she really knew the proper way to challenge me on all my stuff. The

others I had seen weren't really enthusiastic anymore, it seemed like they had been in it for too long. I started noticing all the things she did that I felt an effective counsellor should do. I wanted to become the kind of psychologist that could affect the world the way she was affecting me.

In grade twelve I took my first psychology course and I was instantly in love. It's not that I was a bad student before this; more that I simply didn't CARE. I WANTED to study psychology and gained this eagerness to learn EVERYTHING. In college, psychology just clicked for me, and from then on I knew the focus and the high expectations that I had set for myself. My brother had always been the smart one in high school, so when I brought home my first 'A' I thought, "I AM as smart as my brother", and my mom and brother were so proud. After that I was DETERMINED to prove I could do this. Once I started doing well and enjoying school I wanted to reach as high as I possibly could. So, it wasn't just my master's, I wanted my Ph.D. too. My love for school was a good confirming factor because you have to love school to be a psychologist. I was even motivated to succeed in the elective courses I disliked simply because I knew they were important in reaching my end goal. The end goal was always just shining right in front of me.

There were a few experiences during my psychology degree that continued to confirm my passion for helping and helped to prepare me for getting into the master's program. In the summer after my first year, I went to Africa for a couple months to volunteer in an orphanage. I experienced the impact of just BEING there for people and the power associated with a listening ear. The sight of people less fortunate really struck me. That's when it got really, really intense for me, I just wanted to help in any way that I could.

When I took my first counselling course, my teacher was the director of the master's in counselling psychology program and he was UNBELIEVABLE. I became instantly enamoured with the whole process of acquiring counselling skills. We soon began talking about the master's program. He had a huge influence on me. He helped me understand what I needed to apply. I went out right away and got my first job working with an autistic female as an ABA therapist. At that point my sights were REALLY set; I had never been more determined than I was in year three. I started taking all the steps necessary in making my master's application run as smooth as possible; it was like going through a checklist. I'm glad I started when I did, because it's almost like I got a head start.

While in the counselling course I also began as a volunteer mentor with a former foster child living with fetal alcohol syndrome. I started helping her with all of the issues she was coping with and I began experiencing the effect of a therapeutic relationship firsthand. It was like learning the foundations of therapy outside of the classroom. I noticed how the same techniques that worked best with some people proved the least effective for others. This really emphasized individual uniqueness. One-by-one everything was piling up to make the clearest picture for me that my master's was where I was destined to go. That's when I declared my counselling minor.

During my undergrad I also developed a severe anxiety disorder and was diagnosed with chronic depression; I began to see my psychologist on a weekly basis. Seeing tools put into action by someone in an extremely effective way compelled me once again, giving me the confidence that I could change others as she was changing me. Its one thing to struggle on your own and another to be supported by someone else. Just knowing that I had an



appointment with her was normally enough to get me through the week. I was reminded once again about the power of a relationship.

Just before I was about to graduate I informed the company I was volunteering with that I was interested in any upcoming job openings. I began a full-time youth worker position two months before I even graduated. And after only a few short months I moved up to the coordinator position I am in now. It couldn't be any more counselling related, as my job is basically centred around supporting, listening and working on solutions together with foster families. It has been very comforting to know that while I went to school for four years and knew I wanted to be a helper, when I started in the field, I loved it even more. I can't imagine starting in the counselling field after years of studying only to realize I had wasted my time.

I am so excited to begin my master's in counselling. Within a week or two of graduating I missed school. Once you find something you love you just keep going. My love for education and my love for helping are two different things but they go together. At my convocation I saw the small group of master's graduates and knew that I wanted to be one of them. It's just such a huge accomplishment. I mean education is everything, you can't really get anywhere without it. I've NEVER wanted something more in my life than my master's in counselling, never. And I swear that's why I got in, because I walked into that master's interview with pure determination and extraordinary confidence. I just said to myself 'you're NOT rejecting me, I have worked SO hard.' Getting accepted was the most amazing feeling in the world. And now being on the cusp of it and getting ready to start doing what I love, I'm ecstatic.

As for how the master's in counselling psychology degree fits with my future, I want to do my Ph.D. At the end of it all I want to be a psychologist with my own private practice.

At this point I think I would like to work with mood disorders. I feel like that would give my life a true sense of fulfillment and happiness.

A quote that relates to my experience of deciding to pursue this degree is “be the change you wish to see in the world.” from Ghandi. I see an image of healing and togetherness when I think of this, a picture of people from different cultures and all walks of life, coming together in the world and holding hands. I feel like the master’s in counselling is leading to my path of helping the world around me.

**Fynn.** I am a recent graduate with a master’s in counselling psychology degree named Fynn. I’m twenty-nine. This is the story of how I decided to pursue this field.

There are a lot of little pieces that all came together to make me realize this is what I should be doing, but it’s always felt like something I knew I wanted to do. Looking back, I think what shaped that were my different helping experiences. It felt very natural to be the caregiver and the nurturer. I’ve always wanted to help people and it’s still who I am today. It is something I pride myself on.

My earliest memory of helping was back in grade two. I was asked to help a boy in my class who had a learning disability. I remember liking that my help didn’t feel threatening to him. It always stood out for me as one of my proud moments in elementary school. Then in grade five, I was asked to help another boy who was younger than me and I LOVED that. I also enjoyed being the “big sister” to kids in my dance class. From about grade seven to grade twelve I was always the oldest and I loved being in the sort of big sister/advice giving role. I’ve always wanted to be someone that is approachable, kind, and goes out of their way for people. I think that’s the character I’ve developed as I notice that with a lot of my relationships.

I remember having a more difficult time late in grade eight and nine as it took me a while to find my friend group. I had one friend who used to cut and another who suffered from depression and had an alcohol addiction. It was the first time I learned about mental health and I remember being fascinated by talking about it with them. It was an eye-opening experience to discover the difficulties people have. I guess that interest peaked in high school without me being really aware of it until now. By grade eleven I knew I wanted to go to university and I was pretty sure I wanted to study psychology. So I talked to school counsellors about how to get into that and probably talked to my mom about it too. I definitely talked about counselling as a potential career. It was always that or interior design, but I wasn't good at math, so counselling felt like the fit!

During late high school and my first year of university was the realization that I just loved listening and forming really close relationships with my friends. I was always that friend that would make sure people had their homework done or help people study and I always just LOVED that. I loved being the person that they'd go to for help.

In first and second year of university I was taking a variety of courses, like women's studies, film studies, English and sociology. I hadn't quite found my niche yet. But I did enjoy my upper-level psych courses. In my final year of university I was a peer helper to get some experience in counselling and I remember talking a lot with a peer helping friend about us both wanting to be counsellors. So I knew for sure it was an option that I was thinking about. However it was frustrating that academic advisors never mentioned counselling as an option with a psych degree. So I didn't realize there were all these courses in the education department that I should have been taking if I wanted to get my master's in counselling. And

there was never ANY talk from ANY of our professors about counselling psych courses so I had no idea about them.

I was really happy to be finished my B.A. in Psychology and I didn't want to go back to school right away. I ended up taking three years off in between my undergrad and going back to school, which was a good thing. I didn't feel like starting a master's at twenty-two or twenty-three years old was a good idea for me as I didn't feel I was mature enough or that I had enough life experience. It was nice to take the time off in between to get the life experience I thought I needed and to give myself a chance to miss school. During my time away I started building up my resume and having different experiences through work and travel.

Immediately after my undergrad I used my hospitality experience and worked at a hotel. That summer that I became interested in food, gardening, and growing vegetables and I remember talking very passionately about wanting to open up a therapeutic retreat one day. That same year I also I volunteered at a crisis line to see if I liked it and to build up my resume for eventually applying to a master's program. I remember thinking that I liked helping people by offering support and resources. For two years I then worked on an off as an applied behavioural analysis therapist for children with autism and I loved it. At that point I was so passionate about it that I was playing around with the idea of using my psych degree to go back to school to become a behavioural consultant.

From there I started travelling. After I turned twenty-three I went travelling in Europe for six months and it was the perfect time, not to sound cliché, to figure myself out a bit and have some time to reflect on the big chunk of school that I just finished. I feel that travelling was a big part of what led me to my decision .While travelling I noticed that when I had in

depth conversations with people I would always share my background and my passions, and I remember feeling pretty happy that I sort of knew what I was going to do after travelling. My best friend and I went through the whole “hippy travel phase” and talked about how we’d like to open up an import/export business or a hostel on the beach. It was fun to play around with ideas, but I always knew that I would never do that because I wanted to go back to school and get my master’s.

The next year I volunteered at an orphanage in Vietnam and that was life changing. It was the experience of being the only Westerner in a city, living on my own in Vietnam, and the connection I made with some of the kids. It was the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done and the most fun I’ve ever had helping. This experience was also part of my plan to help get into grad school. By then it was becoming more clear that counselling was my focus but I was also still interested in autism and developmental disabilities because a lot of the children from the orphanage had problems in that area.

From Vietnam I went to Australia where I was working in a restaurant. The boyfriend that I ended up living with there was also interested in opening up a therapeutic retreat and he really valued my background in psychology. I think that shared interest was a big thing that pushed me towards applying for my master’s. There was the feeling that if ever wanted to make this happen I needed to learn how best to help people. I had the basic tools of how to listen, and I knew I had the passion, but I wanted to be able to ACTUALLY know what I was doing. I started looking into getting my pre-requisites for a master’s in counselling psychology. By that point I was feeling more mature and independent and that I had the life experience I felt I needed to gain. I wanted to start a life with this person, have a job and get everything in order. At twenty-five years old, it was sort of a “quarter life kick”. I think the

travelling played a really big part in terms of getting ready to go back to school and think about counselling more seriously.

I came home to Canada to take the pre-requisite courses and I loved them. The application process for grad school was gruelling for me. I applied to three schools in Canada and three schools in the UK. In a way, it was a bit of a struggle for me deciding to come back to school. I'm not that academic of a person, I don't LOVE school. But I knew that I NEEDED to go back and do my master's to get into counselling.

I was first accepted to a school in Ireland for a Master of Science in Autism but I applied just out of interest, I had already made my decision to go into counselling. I was really surprised to get into the program I did as I didn't think my grades were high enough. In fact, I think the fact that it wasn't even my first choice at the time helped me as I was really calm during the interview. The funny thing is that there were almost signs pointing me to that university. I was working as a recruiter of mental health professionals and my colleagues thought highly of the school. I also happened to be working with someone who had just finished his master's there and loved the program. Deciding to do the master's program here changed my life quite a bit because it meant I wasn't going back overseas to be with my boyfriend at the time. It just felt good to be home and everything was falling into place and so it felt like the right decision to stay.

Doing the program definitely had its ups and downs. The amount of things to learn during the program was sometimes overwhelming. You start a master's program thinking that you will end up a master. It wasn't until second year that I realized this is a lifetime of professional development. But positive counselling experiences in practicum confirmed for me that I had for sure made the right choice by pursuing counselling. Now I have started my

first job in my field and I continue to love it. I see counselling as a good fit in terms of life style and work/life balance, and also for the satisfaction I get from ongoing learning.

The metaphor for my experience of deciding to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology would be a garden. Little seeds were planted along the way, and it wasn't until the program where things started to blossom and then now I feel like I have to tend to the garden. For example, "weeding" to make sure bad counselling habits don't pop up. Things are growing and I'm growing as a counsellor, but it's still a life time of caring for, watering, and growing.

**Trisha.** My name is Trisha and I am going into my second year of a master's degree in counselling psychology. I'm twenty-four years old. This is my journey of getting to this program.

I've been interested in psychology since a really young age. There were times when I was a child where I could kind of feel out my parent's thoughts and actions, for example I knew when it wasn't the right time to ask my mom or dad for something. I remember I had a deeper understanding of the mind and how people think at a very young age. That's maybe why I was interested in how people behave and why they do the things they do. I remember in grade seven my friends would say, 'you're going to be a psychologist'. I wasn't sure why they said that but I did like analyzing and observing people. That was kind of the beginning.

In elementary school, my grade four/five teacher had a great personal impact on my life. I really wanted to be like her and change other's lives. She was just a very LOVING lady, really taught with her heart and shared with us the things she loved. I can't put my finger on it, as I didn't have a whole lot of one-on-one time with her because I was quite shy as a child, but she really created a sense of motherly love and was really caring. After her, I

really felt that I want to be a teacher and I started thinking about being in the helping field. My dad's actually a high school math teacher but this teacher was really more of a NURTURER.

In high school, the school counsellor also had a personal impact on me. In grade twelve I took a peer helping course run by the counsellor. He was really invested in us and approached us at a personal level. He taught us a lot about empathy, how to actively listen to others, and the concepts of family dynamics. It ended up being more self-reflective than helping other students. When I got to know him I saw the way he thinks reflected the way I think. So because of him I felt, "I can really relate to this guy, I really want to do what he's doing", but not as a school counsellor. That year I also took a psychology course for the first time and I thought it was really interesting and it suited me. When I graduated, some people in my church fellowship noted that they thought I would be going into psychology but I wasn't sure. Liking psychology wasn't enough to have me put my foot down and decide I'm going to be in that field, there was still some exploring in my first year at university.

During my first year I was kind of confused about what I wanted to do. I felt almost like I was lowering my opportunities, because I was accepted into science and then in the end decided to go with arts to explore. I took random courses. I was thinking "oh should I go in business, should I go back to science, or should I go to nursing?" It was all over the map. I think there was a lot of peer influence as my friends were all kind of exploring and I felt like I should too. A friend at church took psychology and sociology, and after I talked to him I became more rooted in my decision to take psychology. My friends and parents didn't have a huge reaction to me declaring my psychology major in second year. Looking back, my parents really trusted my decision. Growing up they did mention things here and there, such



as, “Do you want to be a doctor? lawyer?”, kind of to fulfil the whole Asian dream, but when I said no they just kind of left it at that.

During my degree I was thinking about going into counselling, social work, or elementary education. I talked to my counsellor back in high school about the difference between social work and counselling. I was interested in social work because of a very good family friend who’s a social worker. I really liked how he and also our youth pastor were willing to talk to youth as if they were on parallel levels – almost as adults. My school counsellor said he felt counselling would be more focused on one-on-one personal relationships, whereas social work was more tying strings for people and grabbing resources for them. With that conversation I felt like I leaned toward counselling.

However, elementary teaching was always my fall back. I was comfortable as I tutored elementary students and kept cramming my courses with pre-requisites for education. I always wondered if it was because I LIKED teaching or was it because it’s a comfortable zone that I’m in and I know. For all four years of university, plan ‘A’ for me was psychology /counselling, and plan ‘B’ was elementary school education. Even at the end of university, I realized I loved the counselling courses I took but I was still really excited about education. At first I was aiming for a counselling program through a seminary school, as I had also thought of going into seminary before. I was disappointed when I found out it was actually focused on marriage and family counselling as I didn’t feel it was a fit since I’m not yet married or have a family myself. But by the end of my degree I was set on the schools I wanted to attend in either counselling or elementary teaching. I had a mentor at my church, and when I talked to her about my plans for graduation she was the one who suggested I go to Taiwan on a semi-missions trip and as a way to see whether I liked teaching or not.

My plan 'B' really did not fall away until I taught in Taiwan. That was the turning point. I think it was maybe four or five months in when I told the missionary I was working with, "you know, I don't think I like this teaching thing" and he said "just be glad you are only doing it for a year." I realized that in a large class of students I couldn't develop one to one relationships. The personal tutoring and the deeper friendships I developed with young women in Taiwan were just much more PERSONAL. When these women would seek help from me and emotionally unload I realized that I needed more skills and training in that aspect. That also pushed my decision to apply to the master's in counselling psychology program even though it was difficult to do from overseas. I did not have any of my counselling notes from undergraduate courses to help me draft up a strong application. I felt like I was scrambling a little bit in refreshing myself of counselling skills I was taught.

When I reflect on my whole counselling journey, I have this image where I'm holding a lantern but I don't know my path. When there is enough light for the next step and I take it, then the second step slowly reveals itself to me. I really need to be active and take that step of faith before God shows me the next one. Having faith that God will show me the next step is something I feel like I've been learning throughout my teenage years. It always tends to happen that way, even with the whole decision to go to Taiwan.

In a Bible study before I left Canada, the passage was talking about going where God's sending you, and I really felt like he was sending me to Taiwan even though I wanted to go to Japan. Obedience was one of the biggest themes. And then there were just a lot of random coincidences involving people I knew who were also in Taiwan. I personally don't think they were coincidences but they were God's revelation to me. It was just God's way of showing me this is the decision He wanted me to take.

I believe this whole journey into the master's in counselling psychology program was all Gods. After I submitted my application, I almost missed attending the admissions interview as I got the e-mail only hours before the scheduled time. I was still in Taiwan then, and for that one week, I was travelling and did not have internet connection. So despite a lot of obstacles in going to this school it just felt so right. After the interview I felt really affirmed because the faculty had so much interest in me and they were very encouraging. There was a lot of excitement to see that the pieces were falling together and that this school was as excited to have me as I was to be accepted into that program.

I think most importantly, what wraps this whole thing together for me is my Christian faith in Jesus. I was quite existential at a very young age and the thought came to me, "what will really last after this life?" To me, at the end of the day when the world passes away, it was God and human souls that really last forever. Hence I decided to choose a field where it can change lives and make an impact not just for this life, but for perhaps the life to come. I wanted it to be meaningful, not just doing a nine to five desk office jobs to keep me alive. That left me with two choices: counselling psychology or teaching because those were the ones I knew the most about.

It's that focus on people and on caring for those in need, loving people who aren't loved; those are my main motivators. I'm just not living this life to the utmost being if I'm not doing it for people and also for God. Counselling to me is a very prayerful profession. Even though counselling is lonely, I have somebody that I can go to in prayer and release that burden of the things clients tell me. Also, I realize that when I'm in the counselling room, God, who understands this person so much more than I could ever understand, is also there. I

can pray for them, and even if they don't share the same faith I can pray for them privately and be a part of their life in that indirect way.

Now that I'm in the counselling master's program at my school I can't really imagine myself doing something else. The classmates that I have are remarkable and so nurturing. Being there has taught me a lot about being a counsellor as well as being a Christian who happens to be a counsellor because I felt like that is very much my identity.

At this point I don't really have a whole lot about what the next step is! But I feel this degree is way more than how I will specifically use it in the workforce, it's more about what I've learned about people and how I am personally applying it in my life as well as equipping me to do further work. I feel like it is really equipping me as a person, as a whole. And after the program, I'll see which direction the lantern moves toward, and then I'll follow and take that step.

**Anastasia.** My name is Anastasia. I'm fifty-two years old and I recently graduated with a Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology degree. This is the story of my decision-making process that brought me to this point in my life.

It feels like I've lived two lives. Honestly, the decision to pursue a master's in counselling psychology didn't even enter my mind until I was in my early forties. Earlier in life, right after high school, it was such a rush to decide "what am I going to do?" I decided to study biology because my dad convinced me that there was a better chance of getting a job if I studied sciences rather than arts. Back then, helping people in a profession such as counselling, NEVER even crossed my mind. That decision came much later, as I needed time to mature and gain an understanding and appreciation for MYSELF and my abilities that I didn't have when I was younger.

Now that I have had the time for self-reflection, I can see how things have come full circle. When I was a child I didn't have a really secure attachment with either of my parents probably because neither of them had secure attachments through no fault of their own. In addition to this early childhood relational trauma, something happened when I was four years old that shattered my interior world. I experienced a physical assault from my dad – an assault that my mom was powerless to stop. At THAT moment in time, I was knocked off the rails and my whole world changed. Basically I experienced a shattering of myself into parts – one part was to be locked away for over forty years. If something in your life affects your healthy development, something that knocks you off the rails, you are then redirected so to speak and you head in another direction – down a different path. And that's certainly what happened to me. Because of what happened I think I was always subconsciously considering, "What does HE (my dad) want me to do, what would be acceptable?" I didn't want this (the attack) to happen again so I had to do whatever it took to be safe in my home environment. I believed the attack happened because of something bad that I had done- I believed that it was my fault –I was to blame and I could not trust myself anymore. My dad knew best. My dad was all about science and valued that, and so I LOOKED where I might fit into that scientific world. In retrospect, going for a bachelor's degree in biology appears to be a compromise (how could I please my dad and study something that I was somewhat competent in?) Having said that, I did enjoy the program for the most part. I do love the environment and ecology, and I think I tend to have an analytical mind. I probably would have perished in an arts program. If I would have gone into a bachelor's of psychology and then straight into counselling psychology I also wouldn't have had a lot of the work experiences I really appreciated. So no regrets.

Some of the jobs I enjoyed most were the summer work positions I held during my university years. I loved helping tourists and working in the natural environment of a National Park. After graduation I did environmental science work in Northern BC. I loved the natural environment there, but it was also fun hearing the stories of ‘the crazy characters’ one finds in the North. It’s the individuals and in depth conversations which stand out in my mind. In hindsight, those are the things I really liked, but at the time I wasn’t thinking that way (of working with people in a helping profession). I was doing what I was doing at that time because I had my biology degree, I was interested in ecology and I had decided that is how I wanted to fulfill my life’s purpose and do service for society. The only thing that I could think of that may have been relevant to my decision-making process regarding my move into the counselling profession PRIOR to my early forties would be my faith and possibly my study of ecology, as both of them helped me to understand systems, the interconnectedness of peoples, and how actions of one can affect many.

It was after I started working for a government environmental agency in the Lower Mainland that I realized the actual WORK itself was not what I wanted to do. I was frustrated and decided it wasn’t worth it anymore, so I started to wonder “what is it that I really want to do?” I was in my mid-twenties and being single, I was free to consider a new career choice. That’s when I realized I loved to write and hear people’s stories. The love of investigation was the bridge for a natural transition from working in the sciences to pursuing a possible career in journalism. However, I didn’t get into any of the journalism schools I applied to, so I started up my own writing and editing service. But I really wasn’t making ends meet doing that so after meeting my husband I found a full-time production editing position for a continuing education organization. I loved that position because it was fulfilling to see the

process of creating something from beginning to end. So my decision-making process went from science and enjoying people, to realizing I really liked stories so maybe let's think about journalism, writing, expression, and that sort of thing to secure a production editing position. I found my production editing position which satisfied a lot of my 'occupational' needs and my focus in life shifted. I was now married and thinking about family so getting a house and 'settling down' came into play.

In my early thirties, I continued the production editing work part-time when I had my daughter, but became a full-time stay-at-home mom when my son was born a couple of years later. However, I just wasn't happy being a full-time mom. I love the kids and I wouldn't have traded the time I had with them for anything, but there was something MORE that I needed. I think that a seed, so not much a conscious thought or idea, but an unconscious 'seed' related to counselling was planted when my children attended a parent participation pre-school and I was exposed to different families. I found it a fascinating study in human development to see the differences between my daughter's class and my son's class – both dynamics and individual personalities. I also saw how the behaviour of mom's with mental disorders impacted their families. My curiosity around family systems was awakened as was the need for more support for new moms and young families. That carried on into the kid's elementary years, and as the moms started to confide in me I realized I enjoyed that one-on-one sharing. But counselling never even OCCURRED to me, I just noticed that I felt comfortable talking to people in that environment and I wished people could get the help they needed.

While the kids were young, my husband and I taught for a natural family planning organization and I really enjoyed talking to the couples. Eventually I took over the office

manager position. I think my husband was hoping it would satisfy me and I wouldn't have these longings for 'something else'. He has known what he wanted to do as a career from about grade six so I don't think he can understand someone like me who is not quite sure what I want to do when I 'grow up'. I took the managerial job with the belief that anyone can do business administration stuff, but I learned that it is really not for everyone. I was still feeling unfulfilled and dissatisfied and I had more time to myself as my children got older. I considered re-entering the world of environmental science and did do a stint writing reports with an environmental consulting firm. I found that the irregular work schedule as a contractor wasn't going to work and to get back into my previous work (with regular hours) would mean doing a master's degree in science which was not of interest to me.

When my children were both in high school I was feeling that call, more so than EVER, to a purpose other than stay at home mom and volunteer. There was a ten year period where I was ruminating and things were stirring. I wondered what I was going to do with all the information and experience that I had, how it all fit together. At that time I had a discussion with the father of one of my son's classmates who works in the mental health field. As he was describing his job I thought "wow, that sounds great, I would LOVE a job like that" but I felt that the opportunity to help others in that regard eluded me because I had a science background and no specific professional experience, even though I DID have a lot of related life experience.

Honestly, looking back, the thing that really helped me figure out what I was going to do was going to my daughter's high school career night! Since I was in the school and had to wait for my daughter anyway, I decided to go to the presentation by the school counsellor. I learned that like me, he did NOT graduate with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Psychology. I



talked to him afterwards and he suggested I speak to the university he attended. When I did, it was almost surreal; it was like they were EXPECTING me! The two men I talked to greeted me like an old friend and immediately started walking me through all the needed steps to fulfil undergraduate pre-requisites before applying to the master's program. I also talked to someone at a university closer to my home but I learned that I would have to do more pre-requisites and there was only a small chance of getting in. There I was, in my late forties, and I thought time was ticking so I put all my eggs in one basket so to speak and I applied to the first university, a bit farther from home, but with the best prospects for acceptance.

Things definitely moved quickly after that as just a few months later I took my first undergraduate course in psychology. At that point I did think, "Okay, am I doing the right thing? I haven't been to university for how many years?" so I decided to take one course and just see how it went. Every semester after that I added on a course and it took me about two years from the time I figured out what I wanted to do to the time I was accepted into the counselling psychology program. During my pre-requisite years, I became acquainted with a couple of mature students who had very definite ideas about their futures as counselling professionals and their entry into the program was not as smooth as mine. My path was clear and I moved effortlessly into the program. I was CONSTANTLY amazed at the way that it all happened. Once in the program, part of me started to ask myself if I really belonged or deserved to be there. It was a tough three years in the master's program, not academically but emotionally. Being a mature student wasn't much of an issue for me, (I am not the type of person to pay a lot of attention to chronological age), although my age did seem to be an issue for others at times. What was important for me was to do a lot of my own work, again it

was as if I was being pulled along to do that and to become whole again. It was almost like the counselling psych program was necessary for ME personally to heal and mature as well as for opening up possibilities for a fulfilling and meaningful life. It was a two-fold process: to fulfil a purpose and to find my place in the world. The sense of calling comes in part from my faith and the feeling that I am here for a reason, but also the belief that as human beings we all have that desire to live a meaningful life .

The metaphor that immediately came to mind for my decision to pursue a master's in counselling psychology was a time-lapsed photo of a blooming water lily. Once the process started after my attendance at my daughter's high school career night, everything moved very quickly and there was absolutely NO DOUBT, I honestly felt like I was swept away with a sense of purpose and surety. It's like when you see time-lapsed photography: there's nothing there at first, then there's the leaf, and then all of a sudden there's the blossom, and then boom, it just opens up and there it is. It's very clear, definite, and purposeful.

I described being knocked off the rails (blindsided) as a child and so I travelled off the rails for quite some time, and then boom (at that high school career night), I was blindsided again and pulled back onto the rails so I could go where I needed to go. When I first talked to people at the university, I had that sense of 'coming home'. I now recognize that as a true encounter because it had that sense of wonder that comes with a deep experience. It touched my being. So the first time I was blindsided was the negative, and now this was the positive as I was knocked back onto the rails. And then of course once the train is back on the rails it moves a lot faster because it's smooth and you pick up steam. When you finally regain that sense of self, there's a little bit of grieving that goes along with that because you realize you have lived that much of your life with only part of you being there. I

have the sense that I managed, did some great things, and don't have a lot of regrets, but I do wonder what would it have been like if my childhood had of been different. I made the best out of what I had. My way wasn't linear but I understand why I made the choices that I did. And I believe that if you really want something you will find a way to make it happen. So that's the question: what do you really want?

When I finished my degree I thought private practice is for me so I RUSHED into all the SHOULD do's of starting a business. Finally I began to wonder why I was rushing when I was actually suffering major burnout at the end of my program. So I have taken some time for myself and I'm ready to go, but I am still looking at my options while being practical. Getting the degree has opened up possibilities and has made me think about where I might want to go with my life. I still haven't decided yet.

**Elliot.** I'm a twenty-two year old student about to enter the first year of a master's in counselling psychology degree. My name is Elliot and this is the story of how I got here.

As a child, I was always encouraged by my mom to try out different things and she supported me in whatever I wanted to do. She said whatever you do when you grow up – do what makes you happy and I'm very glad that she instilled that kind of mentality in me. So, I tried a lot of different activities that kids try and I was probably sticking with the things I was GOOD at or I had some natural inclination towards. That's how you develop some sort of competencies and it becomes part of your personality I guess. I didn't have to stick with things if I really didn't want to. I guess in my early childhood that was the main stepping stone for later decisions.

In high school I continued to try out different things. I wasn't particularly athletic; I wasn't particularly great at writing or that kind of thing. I was good at acting and I did it

fairly extensively throughout high school. I am not sure if I was cognisant of it at the time, but in retrospect I liked the process and I really liked deconstructing emotions of what people were doing and what people were thinking, but I hated the attention. I also didn't particularly like the people that I was working with.

In reflecting back I also noticed that I had a lot of different friend groups. I never really had a clique like most people try to identify with in high school, I just had different people in different groups and that was kind of my friend base. I've always been fairly easy going and NOT liking barriers and edges and things like that, so I didn't like that if I was in BAND, I was going to be labelled a BAND kid, I guess I was rebellious in that way. I think how that translates to counselling is that I find counselling in general is very big grey area. There are no particular right or wrong answers, there are just different conceptualizations of different things. It's very FREE in what you can do and the ways you can think about things. I really respond to that aspect of it. So I guess it's that same picking and choosing kind of thing.

In high school I worked with a lot with kids but I didn't particularly like it. I worked in afterschool programs, at a summer camp, I also worked with kids with disabilities in group homes and at a hospice with kids who had lost a parent. I started to work with the kids with disabilities first, and that basically came about as kind of happenstance through my mom's work. When you're working with kids with disabilities it's really hard to see change. You're helping them in their day-to-day life and that's all you can really do which was kind of frustrating in a sense. I'm not really sure if I was aware of that at the time or not, but that's kind of the feeling I get looking back on it. In contrast, the hospice stuff that I did when I was in high school was a very profound experience to have when I was that young. Seeing people

be able to change, such as going from being completely distraught to seeing the next week they've processed something and they're moving on in some small aspect. I really liked that you could see that change. So that kind of started some of my interest in the counselling area.

In high school I was kind of a science person, so I started off my undergrad in biochem. I found when I was in my first year of university undergrad I really liked the THEORY and I really liked LEARNING about it, but I didn't really like applying that knowledge in labs and the other practical aspect of those types of sciences. I think it was the fact that you were so far removed from what made it meaningful. You create a meaningful solution in the END, but you are so far removed from that in the day-to-day application of it. It made me start thinking about if I actually wanted to make a career out of it as the practical side of it just wouldn't make me happy in the long run.

Then I took a psych course and I started connecting that I could learn about the theory, and I could actually have that connection with people and hopefully be more close to the end results. I don't know if there was a real pinnacle moment in my switch from science to psychology as it progressed fluently. In science there's a lot of brain anatomy and stuff which flows right into psychology. I took some biopsych courses and it just kind of all flowed in the same kind of area. Every psychology course that I've taken has shown me something from a different perspective. I love that whole grey area where you can think you know something and then you take a course and have completely different perspectives on it. Along with psychology, I also completed a minor in counselling and human development.

I realized during my degree that if I am going to do psychology then I really need to try out different aspects of it to find out what I really like. When I came to Vancouver at eighteen I started crisis centre work and then I think four or five months later I started some

research assistant work. I was trying to get a grasp on what parts of psych I really liked, if I wanted to do more of a clinical aspect or more of the counselling aspect at that point. I've worked in three different psych labs, as well as working at a career centre doing some sort of vocational counselling, and also doing psycho-educational workshops at high schools, so I really just wanted to get my feet wet in a bunch of different things and see what I liked.

Working at a crisis centre has been an impactful part of why I wanted to go into counselling. It hasn't just been the work there, which I find very meaningful, but I generally get along really well with the people there too. These are people I can joke around with and have a really meaningful conversation with and then have a completely superficial conversation with. You just know that they're there for the right reasons generally but they can still have humour. I like that social part of it. It was the same thing with the research lab I joined soon after coming to university. I just clicked with the people there as well. It's something along the lines of knowing they're trying to do something meaningful and trying their best to make a difference and make a change, but at the same time that's only PART of what they're doing. They have a totally separate personality and can joke around and stuff like that.

I have a lot of respect for people that try and take a really 'pie in the sky' idea and ground it in something. I find it meaningful when people can actually put ideas into practice. For example, working at a crisis centre you can actually hear people get a sigh of relief, or understand something, or see something from a different perspective. Or at the same end, realizing that you just talked to someone for half an hour and you might not have made anything better, but you talked to someone who didn't have anybody to talk to for half an hour, which is SOMETHING. Another aspect of the crisis centre work I've enjoyed is the

teaching. Seeing people learn and get something that they didn't necessarily understand before is fantastic. I love seeing that part. That feeds into counselling too because you're working with people, feeding different strategies, and doing some psycho-education so it's all similar.

I learned from my lab experiences that I really like research, but I'm not sure if I would like it to be my FOCUS. From what I've seen working with clinical graduate students, they are always stressed out about publishing their research, deadlines and funding and stuff and it just seemed too...clinical. Again it was far removed from seeing results. I think my core would be working with people, communicating and teaching, and doing research as a kind of secondary kind thing. That's basically why I went into the M.A. in Counselling as it seemed to fit that best with that. So I didn't agonize about the decision to go into the counselling rather than clinical side of psychology. I think my broad direction was pretty clear and I tried my best to get as much experience as I could to narrow down exactly what I wanted by chopping off things that I knew I didn't particularly like.

Similarly, I always thought that I would go the academic route. It's never been a question mark that I would continue with school; it was just a question of where and when. My sister actually pointed out the fact that I would be the only person in our family that would have a graduate degree, which is kind of cool. I was always different from a lot of people. Whenever they bitched about school I was like, well, I enjoy learning about things. The school environment has always been something I ENJOY so why not go further in it? Something that is cool about counselling is that continuing education is part of your job, which is awesome.

I'm really bad with metaphors but the one that comes to mind about deciding to go into the master's in counselling psychology was the Goldilocks and the Three Bears story. I specifically remember the Goldilocks episode of The Simpsons where a character was eating porridge and said something like "oh, this one's too hot, and this one's too cold. It doesn't take a genius to figure this out" and he mixed the two together. It's about trying to put together the best from positive and negative experiences I guess. Also, choosing one thing and then if it's not quite right, choosing another thing and going about a decision that way. As I said, my mom encouraged that as I was growing up. Since I'm going to the education department and still working with researchers in the psych department, I'm trying to have my cake and eat it too I guess, and it's working out so far.

In terms of the future, I haven't figured out exactly what I want to do with my degree or if I'm going to do a Ph.D. or not. I like that I have the option to do that if I want to. I'm probably going to be doing research on adolescence as that's the population I definitely think I would enjoy working with in the future. From my experience facilitating workshops in high schools I really resonated with adolescents. They have all these factors that are difficult to deal with so I think that's one population that would be fantastic to target for making some positive change. And I think I'd have a good understanding of how I could do that.

**Anna.** My name is Anna. At forty years old, I have recently graduated from a master's in counselling psychology degree program and now work as a counsellor.

Early on there were people who showed me a side of life that involved talking about feelings and encouraged creative thinking. From a young age I was drawn to that kind of conversation with people.



When I was about six to ten years old there was a woman scout leader who I was close to and was very dear to me. She opened my eyes to conversations about the similarities of how you experience things, how you feel about things, how you think, topics that weren't often talked about in my family. She was very generous to me considering I was a little kid. It was just fascinating to have these kinds of conversations. She gave me a great gift.

When I was fourteen and starting high school I met a very good friend who was another big influence on my life. I grew up in Poland and her parents were very active in the dissident movement there. They were very free-spirited and had books at home that were not accessible normally. I really can say she opened a door to a different way of living than my parents lived. It was kind of more artistic or creative, being more in touch with who you are rather than fitting into the public norms.

These were some of the people who changed me and I grew through our relationships. Talking with them I felt much more alive and able to understand myself more. It validated my experience. I wanted more of those conversations to understand other's experiences, the meaning of life, how relationships work, and why people do what they do. I also learned about the possibility for people to change and be changed by experiences. You can decide to change in some way, and be witness to change in other people. You are not stuck only with what you have. In retrospect, I think these are all really important in counselling.

Together with my good friend, we started to go to a drama class. I enjoyed pretending to be different characters and using that to discover how people behave or the body language used when they feel something. We had a great teacher who was very generous with us so I decided I wanted to do theatre. She sent us to audition for a youth theatre. This was during

the last few years before communism fell apart in Poland, so it was a window when artistic expression that used to be persecuted was suddenly possible. It was a very intense but happy time because we were really absorbed in creating a report of our generation through theatre. I became very close to the people in that theatre troupe, and we encouraged each other to apply for the theatre academy program. So I got theatre training and from there I became an actress, but I was always in theatre that was about important creative aspects or spoke to some aspect of my life rather than just performing. For me, it was also about self-exploration and peeling off the layers of the human experience. Again, that was where I see the relation to counselling and that is the thing that always drew me in. At one point I started to do theatre with youth that were struggling with substance addiction. I was kind of fascinated by why people end up having addictions. At the time it didn't seem significant, but when I moved to Canada I remembered how it involved helping youth to change by using theatre. I started to think about how I could follow that here.

When I immigrated to Canada I realized I was not going to be an actress any anymore. It dawned on me slowly that I could just throw my resume into the garbage because no one cares about some acting academy and what I did before. Of course there was also the language barrier and the fact we had a small child. My husband is an actor so I saw the instability and thought one actor in a family is plenty. I realized it was not what I wanted to do. In a way it was frightening to think I needed to find a different career but at the same time freeing too because I got to ask myself again as an adult, "What is it that I really want to do?" So, from there I started to realize that what I liked about acting wasn't necessarily the performing it was more the creation process and the investigation of what is really behind the lines. It also felt like a new opportunity because there was part of acting I wasn't happy with.

I didn't like that you have very little control over your work and I wasn't comfortable with the networking aspect.

We had a second child, so that gave me some identity and shelter for a while. I met other mothers, my English improved and it kind of bought me some time. But then I was thinking well, if I cannot get even get the practical jobs I don't really want I, might as well invest the same energy into something I really DO want. I started thinking about somehow working with youth using theatre as a teaching and therapeutic tool. I began volunteering with youth in an educational setting and got involved in interactive theatre. It is not therapy, but I was very much aware that it has therapeutic power in many ways as people experience catharsis, they get to tell their stories, it is validating, and it happens in a public space. I started to think about how I could do drama therapy or something like that. I went to an academic advisor and they pointed me towards counselling psych as the closest thing available in Vancouver. When I learned how many pre-requisites I would have to take I thought "I can't do it, it's too expensive and too long." The academic advisor still encouraged me to do the "real thing" instead of the peer counselling program I was thinking about instead. I felt it wasn't possible and he boldly said "oh, you'll be back" and his comments stayed with me.

As I was at home with my daughter and looking for ways to meet people and help my English, I decided to start to take those pre-requisite courses. At first I didn't want to overwhelm myself so I took them without creating too much expectation. And then year by year I slowly completed the courses and became more clear and focused. Through taking the courses I realized they actually involved exactly the same components that I liked about

acting. It was really like finding it in some way, because for a long time I couldn't really put my finger on it.

It was also affirming and influenced me to apply for the master's in counselling psychology degree. Doing the courses was enjoyable and I met with other people who were headed towards that goal. I saw that not everyone was twenty years old, some people already had families and some were immigrants so it showed it was actually possible. Being in that environment made it more real. Some of my classmates were very encouraging and my husband and family were very supportive. During this time I also continued to do part-time, contract group work and saw that without a degree I would hit the ceiling of that. So when I finally finished the pre-requisites I applied for the master's and was admitted the second year I applied.

The way I chose to go into counselling was very different from my choice to do acting. At that time, I was eighteen or nineteen and most of my choices were SOCIAL. It was more about the PEOPLE I admired or wanted to be associated with, I don't even know if I ever asked myself if I liked being an actress. Once I was here in Canada, it was almost like a second chance to look at it more closely without social or family pressures. I could just start from the beginning. I think it was more thorough decision-making, a more mature decision-making I guess, less accidental. In fact, it wouldn't have been possible for me to choose this career if I stayed in Poland as there's still a huge stigma for people to seek out counselling and the field is still developing.

I always wanted to have a job that was not just a job, but was a part of who I am. I wanted to be in touch with the things that matter to me; humanity and helping people who struggle in some way to untangle the knots and find some wellness or health. But it took me a

very long time to even name this. It was not even conscious; I wasn't thinking "oh this is what I want to do" but more following the things that I was energized by and drawn to. My metaphor to describe this is that I was seeking something I could not live without it, like water. I was looking for it, tracking it wherever I could feel the stream and the more I followed it, it led to a bigger creek then finally I felt that I was swimming in the river. Before I was seeking it, but now the profession is moving me.

It feels somehow by finishing the master's my process of feeling home here kind of ended. I always felt like I had to PROVE I could do this because I had immigrated, and now I feel I can start doing it, no more proving. It was the degree I needed to move on to the job and so far it has really paid off.

**Felicia.** I'm a master's in counselling psychology student about to finish my program. My name is Felicia and I am thirty-seven years old. This is how I decided to do a master's degree in counselling psychology.

When I started to chose a career and education in high school, counselling was nowhere on my mind. I started out with teacher's education, then I studied music, but the experience of depression brought my life to a halt and that is when I reorganized my career. It wasn't that I didn't like being a teacher, or teaching music, it was just that being compassionately helped by a counsellor was such a good experience that I got more and more interested in the counselling processes. When I decided to study some more, I decided to study counselling.

The background of my family experience might help in understanding how I got here. In my family there is my mom, dad and four siblings. I'm the third girl and seven years after me is my brother. Growing up there was quite a bit of tension in our family, especially

between my mom and dad. My parents were missionaries and it was all very Christian and fine from the outside, but I guess they had unresolved issues, traumas from their past, and it contributed to tension in their marriage. My sisters and I would talk about it so that gave us some security but we didn't have that so much with our parents. Even though they loved us, they were totally stressed too. The tension was ongoing from my childhood and for some reason it affected me a lot. When they fought it was like I could not exist because I am part of both of them. I also felt like I had no voice and it didn't matter what I said because it didn't count.

In my late teens or so I would say I was depressed. It wasn't diagnosed, as nobody was TALKING about that, but I can see it as I look back now. Then I went to teacher's college at eighteen or nineteen years old and I moved out. I had distraction with friends and school so I felt a little bit of relief from the tension at home. I went into teaching because where I lived in South America, after you graduated from grade twelve the options for women were to become a teacher, nurse, secretary, or to get married and have kids. That was generally what people did locally in this small community. Now things have changed significantly and people have a greater variety of options, but at that time I was quite shy and hesitant to do something very DIFFERENT. Being a teacher was the closest to what I thought I would like to do. My parents were also teachers.

During my general teacher's training I had some teachers who opened my eyes to music training possibilities and my passion for music. I had always taken piano lessons and when I was done with teacher's college I thought, "Wouldn't it be nice to teach music all day". At my school I met a professor couple who were teaching music in Canada and they encouraged me to go to their college to study music. I never DREAMED that something like

that would be possible. I was VERY happy that I could go away to study. My mom could understand because she had the same desire to study away which was cut short because of lack of funding. My dad did not like me moving to a different country where he would have no control over me. He was not going to give me his blessing so he did not give me a hug when I left, but my music teacher was there to say goodbye and he gave me a hug.

I studied music in Canada for four years, and while I was there it was really exciting to learn so much and escape all the family tensions. But somehow it was not really gone. For some reason I couldn't explain, I had such an immense RAGE inside so I got some counselling for the first time. I also found that it was difficult for me to let my emotions come out in the music as I was starting out in my studies. I wasn't secure in myself and I really struggled. But I was persistent and learned more and more how to interpret the music and let my emotions in there, and now it is very therapeutic and satisfying to play. Later when I was teaching music, I could see that if my students were struggling in their life they didn't play well. I was doing something like counselling when I would attune to them so they felt understood would open up and express their emotions musically.

Although I got some help in Canada, when I went back to South America at twenty-three years old I was again confronted with the family tension and I had a crisis. I became depressed and thought, "I can't handle this any longer." I secretly made a decision not to eat anymore as it didn't really make sense to continue living in that existence. A friend suggested I see a counsellor and I ended up staying at a psychiatric hospital for several months. There was this battle within myself about whether I wanted to live or not. I was convinced that the best thing was to stop living, but the experience of a counsellor being so compassionate helped me start to work on how to live. We had a metaphor that when I was ready to take the

risk and jump back into life he would jump with me, and he did. It was safe to say what I really thought with him and he listened to me in a way my parents never had. It was the first time I felt understood like that. In a way, my counsellor was a model of the compassionate God with unconditional love as described in the bible and that changed my faith and my entire outlook on life. From the outside, my life looked fine to other people, but from the inside it was so hopeless and meaningless. And when I worked these things through in counselling I was learning how to live a MEANINGFUL life. So even though at the time I thought I was wasting a year of my life, I guess it was necessary as I changed quite a bit.

I had a contract to work in a small town elementary school for six years and after getting help I was doing well, enjoying my job and had adjusted to the community. But by the end of my contract I felt it wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life and I was eager to study some more. At first the question was whether I would continue with music or study counselling. In the end I chose to come back to Canada to study counselling here for a few reasons. It hasn't always been clear why I made that choice, but formulating my ideas for my master's application and doing the timeline for this research have helped me see what contributed. I know that because it felt so good when I received help I wished others could have the experience of gaining a more meaningful life too. I thought it would be a worthwhile thing to do. A good metaphor is that it's like when you fly on an airplane and they tell you to put the emergency mask on yourself and then help the person beside you. I had received help and now I wanted to pass it on to others. As my counsellor had said, if a plant has fertile soil and you water it and give it sunshine, it will grow. I started growing because through counselling I had received nutrients and warmth and now I wanted to give water and sunshine to help others to grow too. Along with receiving this from counselling, I



also had teachers who were there along the way to encouraged me when I feared that I wouldn't be good enough. And as a result, I've always been able to do well in the end. I think that is maybe the place where clients are at, so I have hope that if they receive help and nurturance they will be able to do well too.

On the other hand, I think that I always enjoyed helping others. In my family it was very natural to help each other. Also, as a teacher, I enjoyed helping kids and seeing how they made progress. It was the same thing when I was teaching piano. It was very satisfying for me to encourage others and see them do well. I can see my enjoyment of helping in retrospect, although I did notice it at the time too, especially during some bigger projects with my students that were just SO satisfying. I think that satisfaction can also happen in a counselling relationship where the counsellor encourages the client. It doesn't always happen that the client grows, but it must be satisfying when you do see it.

For me, choosing a career is also very much connected with my faith. I wanted to do something that fits with what God wants us to do or to contribute to connecting people with God so that they would be touched by his love and that would help them to have a meaningful life. Counselling is a unique way to show people love. Although you might not use the word love, it's a little bit like unconditional care, understanding, acceptance, and encouragement in helping them to figure out their issues and helping them to become stronger.

I am now near the end of my master's in counselling psychology degree. Throughout my studies I've had ups and downs and I've done a lot more growing. Receiving counselling myself has been an ongoing process but I'm now in a much better place. In studying counselling, I realized that often people who have been through trouble themselves also want

to help others. However, you should have processed your OWN stuff before you can really be helpful to others. Even though you won't have everything completely solved in your own life, to a certain level you should be emotionally healthy. My own experience is also very connected to my research. I realized that it was so painful for me to separate from the counsellor that I was securely attached to because the relationship was not terminated in a healthy way. I looked at this area as my thesis topic. As I look to my future, I am afraid to look for a job as I am a little hesitant about doing something new, but I guess I will grow into that step by step. I found it VERY satisfying to work with clients during my practical experiences. When I was able to connect with people, encourage them and watch them become better, that's when I felt alive. So I want to do counselling in the future. I am also interested in continuing to do research that is applicable to the practical counselling setting. So who knows where that will lead me.

### **Cross-narrative Themes**

The thirteen cross-narrative themes generated from participant narratives are presented in a way which conceptually flows with a career decision-making process, or career counselling process, rather than by the number of participants to which they apply. First, I begin with five themes which describe the process of decision-making. Next, I present three themes related to contextual factors influencing the decision and implementation of pursuit of a master's in counselling. The subsequent three themes specifically address potential motivations for studying counselling. The last two themes are related to possible motivations for choosing and sustaining graduate studies. While the themes could have been presented solely in terms of these larger descriptive categories, I felt this mode of presentation would be too reductionistic and would have led to the loss of the richness and

variety expressed across participant experiences. A snapshot of the frequency of themes is presented in the table below.

Table 2: Cross-narrative Themes

| Theme  | Number of Participant Narratives which involve this theme |
|--|---|
| Starts and Stops, Twists and Turns               | 8   |
| Coming Together, Feels Right, Clarity Emerges    | 6   |
| Planned and Purposeful Approach                  | 7   |
| Led by Destiny or a Higher Power                 | 5   |
| Metaphors of Journey, Growth, and Healing        | 8   |
| Influence of Teachers, Mentors, and Helpers      | 7   |
| Influence of Family, Social Group, and Society   | 8   |
| Experiences which Affirmed or Diverted Direction | 8   |
| Impact of Being in a Helping Role                | 8   |
| Noticing an Interest in Psychology and People    | 7   |
| Seeking a Sense of Meaning                       | 5   |
| Motivation for Pursuing Graduate Studies         | 5   |
| Ups and Downs of Living the Decision             | 8   |

**Starts and Stops, Twists and Turns.** Most participants’ narratives were not clear cut accounts of making and implementing a single decision. They often included instances of “stops” or pauses, where participants were making self-realizations, reflecting on experiences, and considering options without taking action. Other times could be characterized as “starts” where they were actively participating in an occupation, trying out different alternatives, or working towards an identified goal. Sometimes these occurrences could overlap. However, these starts and stops were typically not part of a linear process, but rather one that included “twists and turns” where the insights from self-reflection or experiences would result in a change in direction or be interrupted by an unexpected event.

Almost all participants shared some “starts” that were different than their ultimate decision to enter counselling studies. They pursued or investigated other occupational or

degree options, and at some point, stopped and made a turn towards a master's degree in counselling psychology. Two participants directly commented on their decision-making as a multi-part process. Ariel stated, "I think there are two parts to it" and Anastasia shared, "It feels like I've lived two lives", and "It wasn't a linear thing".

Four participants expressed feelings of confusion, fear, or self-doubt at some points during their exploration of alternatives. On the other hand, two of those participants also noted a feeling of freedom as they reassessed their options after having pursued another occupation. Anna described her experience in this way:

So that's kind of when I realized, okay, I'm going to need a different career, which was in a way frightening, but at the same time, freeing too because you kind of get to put it back in the pieces and ask those questions, what is it that I want to do again once you are adult.

Three participants, who were mature students, had studied and worked in different occupations at an earlier time. All described their previous occupations as enjoyable and as good fit at that point in their life. In describing the reasons for their previous occupational choice(s), sometimes it was for practical reasons, such as the need for something stable to add to the family income, and sometimes their choice reflected societal or family expectations. One participant noted that her previous occupational choice had been primarily a social choice to study and work with specific people. Before they made the decision to study counselling, each participant described a period of reassessment where they asked themselves questions such as, "What do I really want to do?"

Interestingly, for each of the mature student participants, counselling was either not well known as an occupation or was known, but not considered until later in life. When it did

become a possibility, a couple of the participants initially felt there were blocks to pursue this direction, such as not having the right educational background or too much time or money to complete the degree. In the end, each pursued a master's degree in counselling psychology and often this choice was linked to the possibility for meaning or personal satisfaction in this occupation.

Instances of discovering counselling psychology as a study or occupational option by “accident” was also mentioned by other participants. Two participants shared that their studies in psychology had not informed them about counselling as a discipline while others came across counselling through contact with people who did counselling work. As Ariel commented, “I accidentally stumbled upon counselling psych, and the more I read about it, the more I realized that was what I was looking for, and it was a fit for me.”

Another part of the temporal aspect to the decision-making process were “stops”, where taking action on decision-making was paused. Some participants described that it was important for them to have time to mature before making the decision to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology, so they either purposefully took time for work or travel, or came to realize retrospectively how gaining maturity had played a part in their decision. A couple of participants described a pause as they focused on parenting rather than their occupational future. Anastasia said this about a period of pause in her decision-making process:

So there was that period, like a ten year period where I was ruminating and things were stirring, okay, what am I going to do with all this information that I have and all this experience that I've had, like where does this all fit in?

These participants also described unconscious decision-making as part of their process during this time. This was represented by phrases such as Anna's comment, "It's not even like conscious... but things that I was energized by and drawn to. It took me a very long time to even name it", and Anastasia's reflection, "I think that a seed, so not a conscious thought or idea, which then finally became a fully realized decision, was planted."

It is important to mention that while most participants described a decision-making and implementation process which seemed to have the quality of starts, stops, twists, and turns, there were two participants who described a more fluid process. For one participant, the decisions he made seemed to naturally flow together, and he did not find the decision-making process difficult. For him, the general direction was clear and things he tried out were just to refine which area of psychology would be his focus. For the other participant, having confidence early in life about her goal to become a psychologist, she noted that the actions she took afterwards were simply to confirm and progress towards that end. She did not feel the need to take other turns or pauses on her path.

**Coming Together, Feels Right, Clarity Emerges.** In the experience of decision-making, six participants described instances where they began to have a sense that things were coming together to form a clear direction. Often this was described as a feeling rather than a logical, cognitive conclusion. They sometimes described this using metaphors, with phrases such as, "One-by-one everything is piling up to make the clearest most perfect picture for me of where I was destined to go", "...a lot of little pieces that, sort of, all came together to make me realize that's what I should be doing", and "It was really like finding it in some way, because for a long time, I couldn't really put my finger on it." For other

participants, the clarity was notable, as in phrases such as, “It’s very clear, definite, and purposeful, like this is it, right?” and “It became more clear and focused.”

There were also many participants who used language that indicated feelings and intuition were part of the decision-making process. Phrases included, “...everything just kind of was falling into place and it felt right to stay”, “I just felt like oh wow, this just felt so right”, “It just clicked”, and “...it was that sense of coming home”. Ariel keenly articulated her experience by saying:

The funny thing is with major decisions like that, I’m a very cautious person. I think by nature, I mull over whether to buy a dress. I’ll go back to the store like three times, and I’m just very strange like that with small decisions, especially with money, I will think really carefully, I’ll consider many things, pros, cons, and that kind of thing, but major decisions like my career and deciding to move to Canada it was all like, okay, this is it, this feels right and I never regretted the choice and I never looked back since. So, yeah, I’m just very curious even to myself, in knowing how quickly and um... UNCEREMONIOUSLY I came to that decision and it’s been the right decision, I never regretted most of my major decisions and I’ve always made them like that.

A few participants shared specific, pivotal decision-making moments that stood out in their memory, such as writing down a career goal in a diary, a particular conversation with a mentor, and attending a career night event. These provided a focus for a shift from deciding to study counselling psychology to the implementation of that decision.

**Planned and Purposeful Approach.** Seven participants’ descriptions of their decision-making and implementation process also included times in their life when they took

actions to purposefully narrow down or try out their study and occupational options. For some participants, this included seeking work in non-counselling occupations they were considering, such as teaching or environmental consulting, in order to find out if they were a fit. A couple of participants took actions to help clarify what academic program they would pursue by speaking to professionals or doing related volunteer and research work. Alternative academic programs considered were often closely related to counselling, such as a clinical psychology degree, a drama counselling program, or a peer counselling certificate. Elliot talked about the actions he took to clarify if clinical or counselling psychology was a better fit for him when he noted:

If I am going to do the psychology then I really need to try out different areas of it and different aspects of it to find out what I really like. I started the crisis centre work, and then, I think four or five months later, I started the research assistant work, and I was really trying to get a grasp on what parts of psych I really liked. I was really looking to see if I wanted to do more of a clinical aspect or more of the counselling aspect at that point. I've worked in three different psych labs, as well as working at a career services centre doing some sort of vocational counselling, at the crisis centre, and also doing workshops at high schools, in mindfulness and suicide awareness, and stuff like that, so I really just wanted to get my feet wet in a bunch of different things and see what I liked.

The clearest description of a planned and purposeful approach came with participants' discussion of actions they took after becoming firm in their decision to apply to master's in counselling psychology degree programs. Many participants shared strategies used to maximize their chances of being accepted to the counselling psychology master's



program. Along with the execution of careful planning to fulfil all pre-requisite course requirements, several participants shared that they sought out volunteer experiences to “build their resume” for a successful application. Other participants focused on getting high marks or applying to the programs that seemed to offer the greatest chance of acceptance. Fynn talked about how her travel experiences were designed not only to give her a chance to gain maturity, but also to build experience for her application for counselling programs. She said:

I went to Asia and I volunteered at an orphanage in Vietnam, and that was HUGE for me... so by that point I knew that I was building a resume, right? So I was doing this A. because I really wanted to go travelling and B. because I wanted to go to Vietnam and help out, but also I knew that I was doing this because my plan was to try to get into grad school and that would be a big help.

**Led by Destiny or a Higher Power.** A total of five participants’ narratives included a sense that their decisions were somehow pre-destined or linked to a higher power. This could reflect different ways that people interpret chance events or could be part of the process of making sense of the past in retrospect. Our individual beliefs and backgrounds naturally frame how we interpret our experiences. Two participants shared that they always just “knew” they wanted to do counselling. One of these participants, Aila, felt she was “...born to do this.” She also described her experience in terms of destiny when she said, “...one-by-one everything is piling up to make the clearest, most perfect picture for me of where I was destined to go, and I knew I wanted my master’s.” Others also noted that they felt some events leading up to their decision to study counselling were put in place purposefully to lead them down that path. Ariel felt that her “missteps” were the “mistakes that were meant to be”. One participant, Anastasia, described her sense that she had been

“pulled” towards completing a master’s in counselling degree because it was what she was supposed to do for her own self-development. She described how she felt this force when the staff of the counselling program at a particular school greeted her like she was expected or meant to be there. She explains:

It was almost like there’s a pull back to THIS is where you need to go, this is actually what you’re supposed to do, THESE are the people you need to meet, these are the people you need to talk to. And so you kind of go, woo, side track and woo, back on to the rails. So that’s what it felt like, that’s what the experience was. And it was almost like... somebody grabbed me from the front of my shirt and said ooh, pulled me, ooh there you are. Like you know those old movies where someone’s peeking around the door and, and the person on the other side goes ‘there you are’ and they grab them and pull them in, that’s what it felt like. It felt like that...

A couple of participants also linked their decision to their faith in God. This finding is not unexpected as one of the local master’s in counselling psychology degree programs is in a faith-based university. A link to God was very clear for Trisha who described how God intervened in her decision to enter a master’s in counselling psychology program through coincidences that led to towards that plan. She stated, “Personally don’t think they were coincidences... I really see it as God’s revelation to me...it was just God’s way of showing me this is the decision I want you to take.”

**Metaphors of Journey, Growth, and Healing.** Participants were asked to speak about a metaphor or image that described their overall experience of deciding to study counselling psychology. In addition, several participants naturally used metaphoric language

in telling the story of their experience. While each individual metaphor was different, three main themes and two participant-specific themes emerged.

One of the most common metaphors was that of a journey or movement with an unknown path or unexpected turns. In fact, this is a common metaphor in career conversations and the movement described seldom forms a straight line (Amundson, 2009). Ariel talked about "...this long and windy [winding] mountainous road that I'm taking, and just as I thought I am done there is this other turn. " For Trisha, the image that came to mind was of a lantern that showed her path one step at a time, and for Anna, it was following a small stream of water that emerged into a river that began moving her. Anastasia spontaneously used a metaphor of being, "bumped back on the rails" at several points during the interview to describe how being in the master's in counselling psychology degree helped her see this was the path she had been meant to take.

Another common metaphor was that of growth and nurturing. Ariel described the experience of growing like a tree with branches in many directions. For Fynn, it was an image of a garden. In her words:

My metaphor would be that my experience has been like a garden... little seeds were planted along the way and it wasn't until the program where things started to blossom, and now I feel like I have to tend to the garden. Things are growing and I'm growing as a counsellor, but there's still lots of, it's still a life time of tending to and caring for and watering and growing.

Felicia described her own personal counselling experience as being like a plant given nutrients and warmth which had led her to want to be able to nurture others in this way. Fast

growth was described by Anastasia, who envisioned a time-lapsed photograph of a blooming water lily representing the rapid surety which emerged about her decision.

Two participants mentioned metaphors which represented healing for self and others. For Aila, it was a favourite quote which first came to mind, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” She sees counselling as a direct way to help people and create that change. She envisioned people of different cultures holding hands, representing touching, healing, and togetherness. For another participant, Felicia, the metaphor was that of the airplane safety procedure. She describes the personal significance of this metaphor by saying:

It’s just like when you fly with the airplane, and they show you the emergency things. They say the air mask, put it on yourself and then help the person beside you. And so, you know, I had received help and now I wanted to pass it on to others. Somebody else helped me put the mask on, but you kind of have to have the mask on yourself before you can help others...now I can help others to get the mask or start growing too.

A metaphor specific to one participant narrative was that of trying out alternatives and picking, choosing, and blending them until it was right. Elliot thought of the Goldilocks and the Three Bears story, as portrayed in the TV Show *The Simpsons* to represent his experience. He described how the character tried out different bowls of porridge to find the right one, and ended up blending them to make it right. He identified this process as representing his lifelong experience of pursuing the activities in which he had talent and interest and leaving the ones that did not fit for him.

Aila used metaphoric language throughout her interview to paint a picture of the goal-oriented determination that infused her experience of deciding to pursue a master’s in

counselling psychology degree. Phrases such as “my sights were set”, “...the end goal was shinning right in front of me”, and “I got a head start” represented her experience of continued linear focus towards her career and educational goal.

**Influence of Teachers, Mentors, and Helpers.** All but one participant noted the important influence that teachers, mentors, and professional helpers had on their decision to study counselling psychology. They shared that these individuals had opened up new perspectives, encouraged them to pursue their interests and goals, or modelled effective helping. Participants highly valued elementary and high school teachers who were caring, nurturing, and invested in their students. Others met professors in university who recognized and encouraged their talents. Felicia shared how influential music teachers encouraged her to come to Canada to study music. She stated that before that encounter, “I never DREAMED that something like that would be possible.” This experience later influenced her decision to return to Canada to study counselling. Several participants noted speaking with academic faculty from the counselling department and how their positive support and direction with entrance requirements gave them confidence to apply to the master’s program.

There were also professionals or acquaintances who assisted participants to understand different occupations or helped them plan the academic route to their goals. Among those mentioned included academic advisors, graduate school staff, former teachers, and family friends. While their role was mainly information giving, this practical guidance was noted as important in decision-making and implementation of the participants’ decision.

Mentors played a more active role in participants’ lives. They included supervisors, church members, activity leaders, and family friends. Several participants noted the key role that their mentors had in helping them make and implement their decision. For Trisha, a

mentor suggested she try out teaching in Taiwan, an experience which she later credited as helping to confirm that counselling rather than teaching was the best occupational choice. For Ariel, a workplace mentor who had studied in Canada and offered family and financial support provided the opportunity for her to study in Vancouver. Ariel explained the personal impact of this mentor by noting:

I was not the person you would expect, if you were to ask my friends before I came to Canada, to go overseas by myself. Yeah, no, I was not, you wouldn't see me as the independent girl who um.... would go to foreign countries and go backpacking and that kind of thing. I was a homebody, I listened to my parents, I turned to them for guidance, yeah, I just basically felt like I needed leadership. So I wasn't that kind of girl if it wasn't for my mentor and friend I would have never made it to Canada to be honest.

It is possible that there is a cultural context to the role of teachers, mentors, and helpers. Some participants described a collective decision-making process where mentor and family voices were central, while for other participants these people acted in support roles for individually chosen goals.

Two participants shared that having a very skilled and supportive personal counsellor or psychologist inspired their confidence to gain the skills to affect change in others. Felicia noted that after receiving help from a counsellor she also felt inspired to help others grow and had gained the emotional strength to be able to do that. Another participant gained an ideal of counselling from her personal counselling experiences. Aila shared:

Just seeing tools put into action by someone in an extremely effective way, because I hadn't found anyone effective like that before, and I just felt this, this compelling

feeling that I can do that, I can do what she's doing, I can affect someone like she can change me.

**Influence of Family, Social Group, and Society.** The influence of family or wider social sphere was mentioned by all participants in the story of their decision-making and decision implementation to pursue a master's in counselling psychology degree. For most, their family offered a supportive environment in which the participant was encouraged to try out options and make the occupational decision which was their own best fit. Two participants in particular noted negative family events or dynamics in which they felt constrained to make occupational or academic choices to meet family expectations. For example, Anastasia shared that a single incident trauma experience had led her to her pursue her initial degree in biology to please her dad. She states, "... because my dad was all about science and valued that, and so I LOOKED for, and again it could have been a subconscious thing, I was looking for where I would fit in that was acceptable." Some experiences shifted from potentially negative to positive. Several participants shared a sense of gratitude that their parents had accepted their direction to pursue psychology and counselling when parental occupational suggestions had been different. For example, Ariel commented, "I was thankful that my parents didn't [object] because if they actually had, and they told me to stick to accounts I might have been an accountant today."

A few participants also shared how the encouragement and support of their friends, partner, or other social group had a positive impact on their decision-making and implementation experience. Some also mentioned that feeling a "fit" with the group they volunteered or studied with affirmed their decision to study counselling or helped them sustain that decision. In speaking about his work at a crisis centre, Elliot stated:

That has been, I guess, a really impactful part of why I wanted to go into counselling. It hasn't just been the work there, which I find very meaningful, but the people that work there are generally people that I get along with really well, so it's I guess that aspect too, that social part of it is like these are people I can joke around with and have a really meaningful conversation with and then have a completely superficial conversation with, and that kind of thing. You just know that they're there for the right reasons generally, but can still have humour, can still talk to them on a different level. Like I said, I like doing that with people.

The role of the wider society in which one was making their career decision was mentioned briefly by a couple of participants. Both grew up outside of Canada and had originally pursued non-counselling occupations in their home country, noting that their previous occupation had been the best fit at that time and place in their life. Felicia shared that in her small community in South America, the only options for women when she graduated were, "...teacher, nurse, secretary, or get married and have kids." Anna noted that the counselling field is not yet well developed in her home country in Eastern Europe so her move to Canada opened that career possibility for her.

**Experiences which Affirmed or Diverted Direction.** All participants shared planned and unplanned events which impacted their decision-making and decision implementation process. Some chose to take a course or job, and through that experience, discovered that they liked or disliked that area. Whether the experience was purposely sought out or was an opportunity which presented itself, what participants discovered about themselves was not always what they anticipated. Interestingly, a number of participants who shared experiences which affirmed their interest in a helping field also had other experiences



which helped them eliminate other occupational or study options they were considering. Trisha chose to teach English in Taiwan in part to see if she should pursue teaching as an occupation. She describes the impact of her experience in this way:

I think there was always this comfort when I think about elementary teaching... and I always wondered is it because I LIKE teaching or is it because it's like a comfortable zone that I'm in and understand and I know. You know that was a fall back for me, it really was..... plan 'A' for me it was more like, psychology slash counselling, and our plan 'B' would be elementary school education, which was kind of my plan B for all the four years of university. Plan 'B' really did not fall away until I taught in Taiwan, yeah, that was really the turning point. .... I think it was maybe four or five months in I was telling the missionary I was working with 'you know what, I don't think I like this teaching thing' and he was like 'just be glad you are only doing it for a year.' I'm pretty sure I think around ...September, October, I went there around May, and by September I'm like 'okay, I'm just going to go to [university counselling psychology program].' And so I applied. I applied and submitted my application in December and they called in February. So it was kinda the determining step, I would say.

Sometimes, however, decision-making was influenced by events or experiences that were beyond the control of the participant. Some people found their initial plans were somehow blocked or unsuccessful, and they were forced to reconsider their direction. At times, they did not get into the educational program they initially wanted. Others found difficulty entering or sustaining a chosen occupation. Yet, as they look back, participants often do not express regret about the plans that did not work out but note that it helped to

lead them to an area they now enjoy. Ariel shared that getting a job working with youth wasn't her first choice, "But it has kind of been my focus ever since."

Two participants shared impactful negative life events which they describe as instrumental in changing their path and themselves. Anastasia shared that a traumatic incident originally sent her down a path of study and work different from her ultimately chosen field of counselling, but she feels that experience has given her the ability to understand others impacted by trauma. The profound experience of being helped through a deep depression motivated Felicia to change her occupational focus and begin to study counselling. She noted that she still enjoyed her job as a music teacher, but after being compassionately helped by her counsellor, "I got more and more interested into counselling processes and what that's all about and started reading about it. When I decided to study some more, at first was the question would I continue with music or would I do the counselling, but then I decided to study counselling."

Several participants said that witnessing the personal struggles of others contributed to their decision to study counselling. While they were not in a helping role at the time, they saw the need for these individuals to have support. Some participants noted that seeing others' struggles led them to become fascinated with why people have mental health issues. During their adolescence, a few participants had friends and acquaintances who suffered from addictions, self-harm, and depression. Aila knew a classmate who committed suicide. Having benefited from counselling herself, she wondered, "...how this girl could have been, could have benefitted if she would have started talking to someone and going to counselling because to commit suicide in grade nine, I mean, you've barely lived." This was a significant experience in her decision-making to become a counsellor.

**Impact of Being in a Helping Role.** Participants often described themselves as taking a helping or nurturing role in their personal or work lives, and they linked these experiences to their desire to enter the counselling field. All eight participants had this theme represented in their narrative account. Several participants shared that early in life they noticed that friends and classmates would confide in them because they were seen as a good listener or as a caring person. Aila shared, “I’ve always been the person that people come to talk to, always, and I feel like I’ve always been a better listener than other people.” This was also a key theme in Fynn’s experience. She states:

Grade twelve and first year of university was more of that realization that I just loved listening and forming really close relationships with my girlfriends and I was always that friend, I had so many guy friends later on in high school, well all through high school, I was always that friend that would make sure they had their homework done, and then would always come to me and study and, and I always just LOVED that. Like, you know, I just loved being that, the girl that, that they’d go to for help.

In other instances, participants were identified as helpers by their teachers and given helping responsibilities in school. For Anastasia, the role of listener was mentioned in relation to fellow parents. Ariel identified herself as always being in a care giving role for younger children in her immediate and extended family.

Many participants described enjoying the experience of working or volunteering in helping occupations such as youth worker, teacher, or facilitator before beginning their studies in counselling. Most emphasized the general enjoyment of helping people, while some participants gained satisfaction by seeing people go through a change process. Several participants noted that the experience of short-term work or volunteering overseas was a

transformational helping experience. Fynn called it, “life changing” and Aila said after her overseas experience, “...that’s when it got really, really intense for me, I just wanted to help in any way that I could. ” A few participants shared that their helping experiences had highlighted their need to gain more training to be able to adequately help people as they noted feeling unprepared to deal with the issues people brought to them.

**Noticing an Interest in Psychology and People.** An interest in psychology or people in general was described by all but one participant. Some participants were able to name this as belonging to the academic realm of psychology while they were still in high school and they later chose to study this as their major in university. Interest in psychology was sometimes traced back to a natural desire to observe and understand people’s behaviours and curiosity about other’s mental health problems. Trisha shared, “I’ve been interested in psychology at a really young age ... I guess I really like to [be] analyzing people, that’s one thing I like to do a lot, and observing people.” For Elliot, part of the attraction to studying psychology was because of its direct application to people and the fact it did not focus on right and wrong answers, but allowed him to see things from different perspectives.

Others did not identify a defined interest in psychology, but described being more generally drawn to understanding peoples’ feelings, behaviour, or the nature of the human condition. For Anastasia, an interest in people was noticed through her enjoyment of hearing individual’s personal stories. A couple of participant mentioned that they felt especially attuned to what others might be thinking and feeling, something referred to in the literature as being “psychologically minded”, although participants did not use this term. Trisha described it in this way, “I found that I had a very deep understanding of the mind, and theories of mind, and how people think at a very young age.” Anna and Elliot shared that deconstructing

emotion was the most enjoyable aspect of their past acting roles. Anna described her attraction to acting by saying:

It was about self-exploration and kind of, unravelling or peeling off the layers of people, human experience. I don't know how else to describe it. Again, that was where I see the relation to counselling, that is the thing that was always fascinating to me, that kind of drew me in.

**Seeking a Sense of Meaning.** Five participants expressed that they wanted their work to be personally meaningful and this was part of the draw to study counselling. For some, this meant doing something that was more than “just a job”. Anna shared a desire for personal meaning in her work by stating:

I always wanted to have a job that was not just a job, but is kind of a part of who I am, where I can be myself, I don't have to pretend to be someone else or where, I can really be in touch with the things that matter to me. Um, which was I guess humanity or people's experiences, or helping people who struggle in some way to untangle the knots and to find some wellness or health.

For some participants, seeing the end result of change in people was seen as the meaningful element of counselling. Others expressed that they felt pursuing counselling as a career after their studies would provide a sense of fulfillment and happiness.

A few participants noted that they were seeking a “calling” or “purpose”, terms that were often linked to their faith. For Anastasia, the sense of calling indicated that she was not happy in her present vocation, and that there was another reason for her existence that she needed to find. Felicia noted that choosing her career was directly connected to her faith. She shared, “I was to do something that would be what God wanted, or contribute to connecting

people with God that they would be touched by His love and that would help them to have a meaningful life.” For Trisha, for her work to be personally meaningful it had to provide a lasting impact on people beyond this life. She shared:

I’m quite existential at a very young age, and I think the thought came to me about, well what will really last after this life? And to me, it really was well God, God’s where end human souls, and I thought I really want to make an impact, and so [if] I am ever going to choose a field, I really want it to be a field where it can change people, where it can change lives and make, not just an impact for this life, but for perhaps a life to come. So yeah, I think that really left me with two choices, so counselling psychology field or teaching.

**Motivation for Pursuing Graduate Studies.** In describing their experience, some participants shared somewhat separate motivations for deciding to study counselling and to pursue graduate studies. Two participants noted that it was important for them to continue on an academic route as they enjoyed learning. Elliot commented, ” I always thought that I would go into an academic route... It’s never been a question mark; I guess I knew that’s where I was going to go, so it was just a question of where and when”.

A couple of participants noted a desire for recognition of academic achievement at the level of master’s degree or beyond. For Aila, this was a personal goal that she had set for herself early on which aligned with her belief that, “You need your education these days... [you] can’t really get anywhere without it. Education is everything. ” She shares her motivation to pursue graduate studies in this way:

When I was at my convocation and I was ONE of SIX hundred undergraduates, and there were ten master’s graduates, I kept saying to myself ‘I want to be one of

THEM, I want to be one of ten, not one of six hundred in one portion of the day.’ It’s just such a huge accomplishment, and all you can think about is, how much they are going to do in the world, and how much they are going to help the world because they’ve obviously made that HUGE dedicated decision to be there. They’ve invested huge time and money and effort, so they’re going to do something with it, they HAVE to, that’s why they’re doing it.

For three other participants, the motivation for pursuing master’s-level studies was mainly practical. Fynn noted that she did not particularly enjoy academics, but she knew it was necessary to achieve her goal of becoming a counsellor. She says:

I’m not that academic of a person, like I don’t LOVE school. So that was a bit of a struggle for me deciding to come back to school, I was so happy to be finished my B.A. and so I didn’t want to go back to school, but I NEEDED to so, and I loved the [counselling] program and I did well in the program.

Similarly, Anna determined that a master’s degree was necessary to reach her goals. She noted, “I was working part-time, but it was all contract jobs as a group facilitator or educator, and I could kind of see the ceiling as without the degree I cannot really do much more.”

**Ups and Downs of Living the Decision.** All participants interviewed had been accepted into a master’s in counselling psychology degree and most had completed more than one year of their program. As a result, all stories naturally extended to the experience of sustaining their decision to study counselling. In describing the process of applying for a master’s degree in counselling psychology, participants called it “gruelling” and “exhausting”. Participants often applied to more than one program and two participants faced challenges as they applied while overseas. At the same time, some participants noted that the

application experience helped confirm that they made the right choice of discipline and program. Trisha described how affirming it was that the school she chose was, "...as excited to have me as I was to be in the program." Aila characterized getting accepted into her counselling master's degree program as, "the most amazing feeling in the world....now being on the cusp of it and being ready to start I'm just, I'm ecstatic." Several participants shared surprise and gratitude for being accepted into their university because they had initially doubted they would be chosen over other applicants with better grades or experience. Lingering thoughts of, "Do I really deserve to be here? How did I get here? Do I really belong here?" followed Anastasia into her studies and contributed to her having, "a tough three years."

Several participants noted that the process of completing their master's degree in counselling psychology was personally challenging in different ways. At times, Fynn felt overwhelmed with the amount of learning that was involved in the program. She came to realize that becoming a counsellor was an ongoing process. She describes it this way:

You start a master's program thinking that you will end up a master. So I had that realization in second year, I'm going to be learning how to do this for a very long time. I'm not going to finish being a counsellor, I'm going to finish being a new counsellor, so the realization that this is a big undertaking that I've undertaken. This is a lifetime of learning and a lifetime of professional development, and so I didn't really realize that until second year.

The length and cost of the program felt challenging to some participants as well. Two people noted that during their studies they pursued personal counselling for themselves. Felicia shared that during her studies, "...I've had up and downs and I've done a lot more of



growing, and I wasn't done with receiving counselling myself. That was sort of an ongoing process. I'm now in a much better place."

A number of participants also shared that in doing their master's degree they confirmed that counselling was the right program and profession for them. Real-world counselling experiences through the practical components of training were often mentioned specifically in this regard. Several participants said the experience of connecting with clients and feeling that they had helped them was very satisfying. Felicia stated, "I find it VERY satisfying through all the practicum and internship, very satisfying to work with clients, so I REALLY enjoyed that, that's when I felt alive. So I want to do that". Several people also mentioned that they were excited to be entering a profession that involved ongoing learning and professional development.

When I asked participants to comment on how their master's in counselling degree fit with their future life goals, the answers generally fell into three categories: to become a counsellor or psychologist (or they had started working in this role), to apply what they had learned beyond the role of counsellor (such as in research, counsellor education or continued personal development), or they were still in the process of defining how the degree fit with their future. Several participants' responses encompassed more than one of these categories, suggesting for at least some individuals, the process of career decision-making may continue both during and post-degree.

While a couple of participants had specific conceptualizations of their ideal counselling role and population, it was also common for responses to suggest that they saw the value of the degree defined beyond the occupation they planned to pursue, but also in

terms of enriching their life. As Trisha shared, “I feel like it is really equipping me as a person, as a whole.”

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have presented eight individual participant narratives as well as thirteen cross-narrative themes. First, I introduced themes that describe the process of decision-making, and then I presented those related to contextual factors. Lastly, themes that were specific to choosing and implementing plans to study counselling and graduate education were detailed. All participant narratives included: Starts and Stops, Twists and Turns; Metaphors of Journey, Growth and Healing; Influence of Family, Social Group, and Society; Experiences which Affirmed or Diverted Direction; Impact of Being in a Helping Role; and Ups and Downs of Living the Decision. The three themes that applied to the least number of participants were: Seeking a Sense of Meaning; Motivation for Pursuing Graduate Studies; and Led by Destiny or a Higher Power.

Overall, the findings present a view of the experience of deciding and implementing the decision to pursue a master’s in counselling psychology degree that emphasizes a non-linear process where a variety of internal and external influences shaped individual journeys to the same destination. As this specific topic had not previously been researched, it provides us with a first glimpse into the lived experience of counselling student CDM. In the next chapter, I discuss these findings in light of current literature and suggest implications for future research and practice.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This was an exploratory study. Through my research I aimed to better understand the experience of deciding and implementing the decision to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology, as narrated by students who are currently in, or have or recently completed, this program. This question was asked in relation to different understandings of CDM processes and in the context of a complex and changing world of work. Along with my natural curiosity about this topic as a novice career counsellor, I hoped to potentially add a qualitative understanding of this experience to the CDM literature and to identify indicated changes to career counselling practice. Furthermore, by asking about the CDM of potential future counsellors specifically, it was hoped that some of the reasons why people are motivated to enter this field would be illuminated, thereby addressing a gap in current knowledge on this topic. I feel that I have addressed my aims for this study. The answers to my research question are discussed in detail in the previous chapter.

In this final chapter I will consider my findings in relation to the existing literature, explore implications for CDM research and career counselling practice, detail limitations, and explore possible future directions.

### **Connections to the Literature**

My interpretation of the research findings for this study confirms, challenges, and adds novel contributions to different aspects of the existing literature. While I endeavoured to complete a thorough literature review, I can only speak to literature of which I am currently aware and have reviewed to date.

**Changes in Career Development.** Much of the literature on 21<sup>st</sup> century career development acknowledges that there have been changes in the world of work since many

traditional models of career development and decision-making were developed. Key changes include globalization, demographic shifts, and technological advancement (Amundson, 2005) leading to the reality that career decision-making is no longer a once-in-a-lifetime event (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Career self-management over the lifespan includes making multiple career-related decisions at different points of life and as work opportunities in the labour market change. This shift also means that career deciders must take into account more than individual factors such as interests, values, and personality, and factor in their context, including the people in their life and the society and culture in which they live.

For my participants, there was little mention of the direct impacts of globalization, demographic changes, and technology shifts on their CDM experience. I think, however, it is notable that many participants made and implemented their decision in a global context. Three domestic students engaged in overseas experiences which helped form their decision to study counselling, and two international students and one immigrant to Canada noted how experiences in their home countries shaped their path to a master's in counselling degree.

The impact of making and implementing a decision in a work world with shifting opportunities was evident in participant narratives. Almost all participants took time to investigate several options or had worked in other occupations before entering their counselling studies. Many participants shared unplanned events which closed or opened doors as they were in the decision-making or implementation process. Participants noted how their context, such as the people around them and their larger society, supported or challenged their decisions. In fact, it seemed that with so many options and uncertainties, participants often utilized supports such as teachers, mentors, helpers, friends, and family to help navigate a career path in uncertain territory. These factors come through in the cross-

narrative themes such as: Influence of Teachers, Mentors, and Helpers; Influence of Family, Social Group, and Society; Experiences which Affirmed or Diverted Direction; and Starts and Stops, Twists and Turns.

The reality of self-managed, life-long career development was most evident in the narratives of mature students who had worked in other fields prior to pursuing counselling studies. They shared how previous choices fit at that point in their life and how subsequent life changes (such as immigration, end of childrearing years, and recovery from mental health challenges) led them to re-evaluate their career path and decide to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology. As I will discuss next, the experience of making and implementing career decisions in a changing work world also has impacts on the CDM models which best match participant experiences.

**Career Decision-making Models.** In my summary of CDM models, I make the distinction between models that rely on an assumption of individualistic, rational weighting of information and options, and other-than-rational models which include social context, intuition, chance, and change in the decision-making process. While it is likely too simplistic to characterize all career theory as fitting exclusively into these two categories, I have presented it this way for contrast. The shift in CDM thinking is well summarized by Krieshok et al. (2009) who notes that vocational decision-making is moving from a place where “it’s all about the match” to one where “it’s all about adapting to change”.

Overall, for my participants, narrative themes indicate more emphasis on other-than-rational decision-making processes. However, there was an element of “matching” and systematic consideration of alternatives present in the narrative accounts. In the tradition of Parsons (1909), choice of vocation involves a rational comparison of one’s aptitudes,

abilities, interests, and other internal characteristics against the details of specific occupations. Modern cognitive models of CDM such as expected utility (EU) models (Piz & Harren, 1980; Katz, 1996) and sequential elimination (Gati, 1986) suggest a systematic reduction of alternatives to arrive at the decision that offers the best match.

A systematic approach is best reflected in Elliot's narrative. He clearly outlined how he learned about himself through noticing which activities he liked and those he did not like. Once he had identified a defined interest in psychology, he pursued experiences related to both clinical and counselling psychology to determine which avenue was the best fit for him. His interview narrative did not include the role of others or context as central elements of his decision-making. I also interpreted Aila, Trisha, Fynn, and Ariel's experiences to include conscious weighing of options to find the best match to their personal preferences. Each described taking their awareness of an interest in people and helping, and using that knowledge to identify helping roles they might consider as an occupation. Aila determined counselling was the best fit early in life, while the others tried out other helping roles before ultimately choosing to study counselling. It is important to note that because all participants spoke about their decision-making process in retrospect, it is hard to determine how aware they were of the role of interests and experiences at the time they made the decision, or if it seems to all fit together in making sense of it now.

It is also noteworthy that a planned and strategic weighing of possible decisions was more evident in the implementation of the decision to study a counselling master's degree. Participants often gathered information from counselling program faculty or advisors and used this knowledge to weigh out what action to take to maximize their chances for acceptance. For Anastasia, information from advisors factored into her decision to apply to

the school with less pre-requisite requirements and fewer applicants. For Aila and Fynn, it meant pursuing volunteer experiences to build their resume.

In comparing my findings to literature on other-than-rational models of CDM, there is alignment with those models that take into account shifting opportunities, multiple life roles, and the role of emotion, intuition, and chance. I will look at several of these models in light of my findings.

Phillips (1994, 1997) suggests that in an “unstable field of opportunities”, decision-making strategies such as intuitive, emotional, and consultative deciding are adaptive. These approaches were used by a number of participants, as reflected in the theme *Coming Together, Feels Right, Clarity Emerges*. The central role others played in decision-making is discussed in the theme *Influence of Teachers, Mentors, and Helpers* as well as the theme *Influence of Family, Social Group, and Society*.

Krieshok’s (1998, 2009) anti-introspectivist (AI) view of CDM suggest that decision-making is largely performed at an unconscious level and that decision-makers tend to err when reflecting on decisions. Some participants noted the role of unconscious decision-making in their process, such as Anna and Anastasia who noted periods where they felt they were being led towards a decision without their awareness.

In my assessment, both my findings and my observations during research interviews offer some support for the idea that it is difficult to reflect on decision-making processes because we are not aware of our unconscious decision-making processes. During research interviews, I noticed there were a number of instances when participants would make comments similar to, “I wasn’t aware of it at the time, but I think this influenced my decision.” As a researcher, I also found myself asking participants to clarify if a realization

was made as they recounted the event, or if it was known at the time they were making the decision. I also noticed participants were sometimes unsure how they came to a particular decision and so they tried to make sense of their process in retrospect. Not only does this speak to the potential that we are sometimes unaware of the reasons for our decisions, I believe it also demonstrates the social construction of knowledge. In choosing a narrative research method and inviting participants to tell the story of their decision-making in dialogue with me, it was an opportunity to make sense of past experiences regardless if they were the reasons for their actions at the time. I believe this suggests potential usefulness of narrative conversations to help people make sense of their experiences while actively in the midst of decision-making as well. Similarly, for several participants it was easier to articulate the process side of their decision using metaphors than by recounting specific events or procedures. Metaphors are useful to help people to think about things in new ways, in part because they harness the power of relating to familiar examples with the same dynamics. Consequently, metaphors are suggested as useful tools for career counselling practice (Amundson, 2009).

My findings also included themes which support the role of chance and change as discussed in the theories of positive uncertainty (Gelatt, 1989), planned happenstance (Mitchell et al., 1999), and chaos theory (Pryor & Bright, 2003). The role of chance was most notable in the theme titled Experiences which Affirmed or Diverted Direction. Participants shared many unplanned events that helped shape the journey that led them to pursue a master's in counselling psychology degree. These included chance encounters with people and not being accepted into other programs. In addition, the finding that several participants continue to consider their post-graduation career plans fits with the view that it is good to



remain flexible with goals, as suggested by positive uncertainty. This also aligns with the planned happenstance approach with favours undecidedness over premature decision-making. McMahon and Patton's (2006) system theory framework also acknowledges the role of chance events. Their meta-theoretical account of career development with interacting systems of the individual, societal, and environmental/societal system has parallels with the influence of both individual and social context shown in my findings.

There are also findings from my research which were not reflected in the literature I reviewed. In my study, participants shared stories which indicated a belief that destiny or God played a role in their decision to pursue a master's in counselling. Related to this was a search for meaning or a "calling". While a scan of the literature related to spirituality and career indicates this topic is becoming more discussed in career counselling research, it is not a well-recognized part of CDM. Instead, many CDM theories assume the individual has primary control in choosing their career direction. In a similar vein, my participants indicated that others often played an important role in shaping their decision and implementation of this decision. Once again, this challenges the notion of individual CDM. The role of others in decision-making could have a cultural component for participants who identify with a collectivist culture, and could indicate that even in individualistic western society career decisions are more interconnected with social context than is acknowledged in most career theory. I also interpreted my participants' narratives as having a temporal quality in the flow of their decision-making. While each path was unique, a number of participants noted times when they were unsure and decisions were moving slowly, times when they paused their CDM process, and times when things became clear and decisions and actions were taken quickly. The temporal aspect was present in two of the most common metaphors of the

process as well. For example, the journey of CDM was described as full of unknown twists and turns with the sense of an unpredictable tempo of movement. Similarly, the metaphor of natural plant growth also conveyed the quality of a slowly developing process or quickly blooming realization.

**Post-secondary Student CDM.** My findings are most similar to qualitative research studies on undergraduate student CDM. There was some alignment with what is known about non-traditional student career development and counselling students' career development, but less in common with how graduate student career development is conceptualized. My study seems to offer new perspectives into the CDM experience of graduate students and counselling students specifically, addressing a gap in knowledge. I will discuss key points for each area.

The career decision-making models for traditionally-aged students (those under twenty-five years old) described by Harren (1979), Johnson (1998), and Niles et al. (1998) had some similarity to the experience described by two participants, both age twenty-two. Harren (1979) described a four stage sequential process of awareness, planning, commitment, and implementation that flowed in a linear way. These two participants, who were entering a master's in counselling psychology degree program directly from their undergraduate degree, described their decision to study counselling as something they decided and implemented in a more or less direct way. This linear process was in contrast to the "twists and turns" noted by other participants who took time away from their studies to explore or implement other occupational or life options. However, the rational decision-making style said to lead to the most successful career decision-making process did not completely fit their experience, as these participants went beyond a logical assessment of information. One participant used

intuitive decision-making to arrive at her decision, and both were influenced by others in different ways during their process. These elements were discouraged in Harren's (1979) model.

More of my participants described a non-linear, intuitive decision-making process. Their narratives highlighted the important influence of the people, experiences, and life situation at the time they made and implemented their decision. This process was similar to the qualitative studies into student CDM presented in the literature. Bubany et al. (2008), Brown (2004), and Lent et al. (2002) present a view of CDM which is iterative, takes into account both personal and contextual factors, and includes intuitive and experiential decision-making. A narrative inquiry into three social worker master's students' career choice found a complex, unfolding process linked to personal and community context (Mensinga, 2009). Wiesenberg and Aghakhani's (2007) survey of master's of education or counselling program students' transition experiences also found that contextual factors were significant. It is interesting to note that in the qualitative studies in the literature, each had a small sample size and mainly included undergraduate or graduate students under thirty years old. Despite the demographic differences, student CDM processes were similar to my participants.

Since the majority of my participants (five out of eight) were over the age of twenty-five, I was particularly interested in comparing my results to the small amount of literature on non-traditional student career development. The literature notes that these students often have work, family, and other community responsibilities outside of school and take a more instrumental orientation to their education (Luzzo, 2000). Two of my participants had family responsibilities which influenced how they came to study counselling, and two participants

noted partial motivation for completing a master's in counselling as a means to an end to get a counselling job. So these aspects of the "mature" student experience were supported in my findings. There was less support for Luzzo's characterization of non-traditional student career development needs. He suggests that these students bring knowledge from past career development which emotionally prepares them for CDM activities, although they may still lack CDM self-efficacy. While the older participants in my study did show mature CDM attitudes in terms of their ability to reflect on their past experiences and to develop self-awareness to guide future choices, they did not express less anxiety and fear in the decision-making process as Luzzo suggests. In fact, participants noted how their first choice was dictated by external factors, so they faced a new and sometimes challenging CDM process in their choice to study counselling. This finding seems to indicate that non-traditional career decision-makers could benefit from similar supports as those making career decisions for the first time.

Most of the literature related to graduate student career development differed from the findings of my study. My results did not support the assertions that people choose graduate studies primarily as a way to enhance job and earning potential or to delay entry into the labour market ("Chapter 2: Decision to Attend Graduate School", Luzzo, 2000). On the whole, participant narratives also did not emphasize factors such as work dissatisfaction or desire to maintain a student lifestyle, as found by Bowman (2005). My participant narratives about choosing a master's in counselling psychology degree often included more personal motivations such as seeking a sense of meaning or an enjoyment of helping. These may be experiences specific to counselling students or reflect a tendency by those in the helping field to emphasize altruistic motivations over practical ones. While not mentioned in the literature,

I was also personally surprised that only one participant explicitly mentioned a desire to enter graduate studies for the pride of achieving an advanced degree. Participants reported that the decision to earn a master's degree in counselling psychology was tied more to an interest in counselling than the advancement of educational credentials.

The main finding supported by current graduate student CDM literature was that several participants were still in the process of exploring their specific post-graduation occupational goals. Luzzo (2000) suggests that many people enter graduate studies with unclear occupational goals and may use the experience to crystallize a career decision. Busacca and Wester (2006) found this to be true of master's-level counselling trainees who reported career development needs at both Super's exploration and establishment stages. I believe my study has contributed to the literature by providing additional evidence of ongoing CDM during graduate studies. It is notable that even in a professional program with clear occupational links, such as a master's in counselling psychology degree, it does not necessarily follow that all students will choose to enter this occupation post-graduation. Some of my participants were unsure of their occupational goals and some described interests in counselling research or counsellor education. Other participants noted that the program was beneficial beyond job prospects in terms of offering self-development and growth. Furthermore, I feel this finding supports the assertion that career development is a lifelong process and that remaining flexible to change is adaptive. As a result, ongoing career counselling supports for graduate students and recent graduates may be useful. Overall, my study contributed to the literature by providing a detailed view into the CDM process of counselling students, something that had not been studied in a qualitative way.

**Motivation to Choose a Counselling Career.** The reasons participants indicated for their interest in studying counselling had a different emphasis from the motivations most discussed in the literature. Coming mainly from a psychodynamic perspective, difficult early family experiences and the need for self-healing (the concept of the “wounded healer”) are emphasized in the literature as reasons for entering a helping-oriented occupational choice (Farber et al., 2005; Sedgwick, 1994). In my study, more participants noted positive early experiences than negative ones. No participants described a family dynamic in which they took on a caretaking role of their parents, something that DiCaccvo (2002) found was prevalent with trainee counsellors. In fact, the support and encouragement given by family, teachers, and mentors often led participants to aspire to helping roles and led them to helping experiences which confirmed their motivation to study counselling. For those participants who did share difficult family experiences, there is support for the notion that these experiences led to self-awareness, empathy, and belief in recovery (Cain, 2000; Farber et al., 2005) more so than a purely unconscious desire to meet emotional needs. Participants also noted that they did not have to personally experience difficulties to be drawn to the potential for psychological healing, as witnessing the person struggles of others was also shared as instigating an interest in counselling.

Other findings of my research aligned with the literature on motivations. Specifically, psychological-mindedness and influence of mentors were reflected in my research data. The literature stated that those who are attracted to psychotherapy are generally psychological minded (Farber, 1985; Farber et al., 2005). Almost all my participants described an interest in psychology or people’s feelings, behaviour, or the nature of the human condition. One participant noted that since childhood, she has had a talent for recognizing other’s feelings,

while other participants found themselves often in the role of confidant for friends. These are elements described as part of the definition of psychological-mindedness. The role of mentors was also a major theme in participants' narratives. Magnuson et al. (2003) found that many leaders in counselling identified family members and teachers as significant mentors, a situation shared by the counselling students in my study. Furthermore, Farber et al. (2005) report that one's own personal therapist can be a mentor and impetus for counselling as an occupational choice. This was the case for two participants who shared the impact of their own counselling experiences on their occupational choice.

One motivation that was not explicitly mentioned by participants was that of the potential monetary and status rewards of the counselling profession. This result is different from the findings of Tipton and White (1988), but could be explained by literature suggesting that students don't often mention these motivator because these intentions are not as highly praised in the field as philanthropic ones (Williams-Nickelson, 2003).

My findings suggest one possible novel contribution to the literature on motivations to enter the counselling field. A number of participants spoke about choosing to pursue counselling studies because it was work that would be personally meaningful, either through embodying their personal values or as a link to a higher purpose or faith. This seems to go beyond the simple altruistic motivation to "help people" that is most mentioned in the literature I reviewed.

## **Implications**

**Future Research.** This exploratory study suggests several other areas to be investigated, including further exploration of novel findings. To start, additional qualitative research may clarify if the decision-making processes described by participants are particular to

counselling students or more typical of students' or general decision-makers' lived experiences. For example, future research could look more closely at the sense of destiny or control from a higher power in CDM processes in general. There could also be investigation into the possibility that other's CDM experiences have a varied tempo including times of pause and times of rapid clarity.

There are also possibilities for further research related to counselling students. Exploring the role of meaning or "calling" in counselling students' satisfaction with studies and counselling work would be a fascinating topic. Several of my participants also commented on the helpfulness of the timeline exercise and interview conversation in coming to understand or reconnecting with the reasons they chose to study counselling. Since the literature suggests that values awareness in counselling students can diminish issues of role conflict, incongruence, and ambiguity (Busacca et al., 2010) and knowing our own motivations can assist with our ethical obligations to clients (Canadian Psychological Association, 2010), future research could investigate the usefulness of integrating these types of activities in counsellor education programs. In addition, the timeline exercise was a useful tool for the narrative research process so should be considered by future researchers investigating an aspect of participants' life experiences.

**Career Counselling Practice.** My participants' stories give an insight into the lived experience of career decision-making which differs from some traditional models of CDM used in career counselling post-secondary students. While larger conclusions about CDM processes cannot be drawn from experiences specific to a small number of counselling students, this information may help practitioners (especially those who career counsel students) conceptualize alternative decision-making processes. My study shows that people



may successfully come to a career decision by using unconscious, intuitive, and emotional decision-making, by trying out different experiences, and by utilizing the supports and information provided from those in their social sphere. These areas are not typically given great emphasis in post-secondary career counselling conversations based on traditional career theory, such as Holland's theory of vocational personalities and work environment or Sampson's cognitive information processing approach (Hartung & Niles, 2000). Post-modern career theories and interventions may offer more possibility for these topics to be included. For example, given some participants' positive feedback about the benefit of the narrative research process, narrative career interventions which encourage meaning-making through story might be useful. Career counselling interventions focusing on the match between individual traits and occupations also have a place in CDM, as evidenced by the fact that my participants also took into account individual factors such as an interest in people and values related to helping. It is possible, however, that in a changing world of work, tapping into a wider view of decision-making is adaptable to take into account more contextual factors.

Specifically, my research findings seem to suggest possible areas for career counselling conversations with students. Based on the finding that social context was an important part of the decision-making and implementation process for many participants, career counsellors could encourage student to utilize their social networks (such as teachers, mentors, helpers, and family) for support, models of different occupations, and information as they consider occupational and study options. It also may be helpful for career counsellors to ask students how their family and their culture will impact their decision-making process. Career counsellors may want to encourage students to engage in a variety of experiences to

learn about themselves and use this information to confirm or reject possible options. As is suggested by the concepts of positive uncertainty and planned happenstance, my research findings also suggest possible benefit in embracing change and taking advantage of chance events.

Since my findings suggest that students' real-life decision-making process is less logical and linear than career counselling theories and interventions assume, discussion about the variations in decision-making experiences could be helpful to address. Career professionals could remind students that decision-making is a process, not a one-time event and that there may be times when it seems to be moving slowly and other times when clarity comes quickly. It is common to pursue different possibilities and change one's mind, even after implementing a decision. Students can be educated that good decisions can come through both planning and intuition. For some, spiritual elements might also be important.

I believe that it is also important for career counsellors to recognize that making career decisions involves imagining one's future self and environment, something that can be difficult for people to do. My participants were able to make sense of events and decisions in retrospect, but at the time, they were not always aware of their significance. This observation suggests it may be useful for career counsellors to normalize with students the difficulties in feeling confident in a future path in the present time, especially in a world full of change. It can also encourage career counsellors to help clients make sense of the significance of their past and present experiences through questions, stories, and metaphors.

In my view, it is notable that none of the participants mentioned career counselling as part of their CDM process. It is possibly because they did not experience a level of indecision-related distress that might have led them to seek out career counselling assistance.

However, there is also the potential that participants did not have a sense of what career counselling has to offer during times of transition. Given that all the participants were self-reflective and they referenced the benefit of hearing the perspectives of mentors, helpers, and other social contacts, it seems that career counselling could have offered an additional perspective during the decision-making and implementation process. The absence of career counselling in these narratives is something for practitioners to ponder or to ask participants about in future research.

My research also provides information that might be helpful to career counsellors and program advisors who speak specifically with potential master's in counselling psychology students, and could be directly useful to potential applicants to master's in counselling psychology degree programs themselves. Again, keeping in mind that the findings of this study are not generalizable to all people who decide to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology (nor was this the intent), this study does suggest that those who pursue this degree and occupation are a heterogeneous group with different backgrounds, experiences, and expectations. There is no one straight "path" that leads people to counselling. Yet commonalities in participants existed in terms of enjoyment of past helping roles, having an interest in psychology and people, and wanting work that had a sense of personal meaning.

### **Limitations**

In considering the findings of this study, it is important to keep in mind that each participant narrative is a "snapshot" of their reflections. An individual's understanding of a past experience may deepen and change over time, so participants' insights in to their CDM process and motivation may evolve at different points in their studies or career. If this same

research question had been asked by another person, the emergent narratives and themes also could have changed. My role as a fellow counselling student may have influenced what was or was not said. This is a reality acknowledged by narrative research. While it is not a limitation per se, it is a caution to avoid generalizing the findings to other career decision-makers or viewing the data as representative of some “truth” about the experience of deciding to study counselling.

It is also possible that my participants might have had characteristics different from others who have also decided and implemented the decision to study counselling psychology. I only interviewed those who successfully applied to a master’s in counselling psychology degree program. The experience of those who made this decision, but were unsuccessful, may be different. In fact, if participants had applied to a more competitive program where they may have faced multiple rejections, this could have changed their CDM experience.

In addition, all of my participants were generally pleased with their decision to study counselling. Master’s in counselling psychology students who were less satisfied with their experience may have been hesitant to volunteer for my study, so their voices are not represented. It is also important to note that findings related to the influence of a higher power may have been more prevalent because of participation of students from a faith-based university. With a small sample size it is also difficult to comment on the influence that gender, age, culture, or the level of decidedness may have had on participants’ experiences. Future studies looking at the differences between male and female experiences of decision-making, for example, could be worthwhile. Lastly, it may be that the career decision and implementation experience described is unique to counselling students while other students and career decision-makers experience a different process.

## **Conclusion**

There is more than one path to becoming a master's in counselling psychology student and numerous reasons why people pursue and maintain this occupational choice. The rich, personal narratives of my participants bring this reality alive. This study has highlighted the differences between students' real-life experiences of CDM and the career counselling theories and practice currently addressing this population. My findings suggest new areas for research and additional topics to be included in career counselling conversations with students. My findings have also begun to address a gap in the literature about the possible reasons why people choose to study counselling. They challenge some assumptions about the graduate student experience, such as the motivations for becoming a graduate student and their career development needs. Overall, by turning the counselling research lens back upon ourselves, and our understandings of the process that brought us to this profession, we open up possibilities for conceptualizing the experience in new ways.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A : Recruitment E-mail

Dear fellow master's students;

My name is Erin Smith and I am currently a graduate student in the counselling psychology program at UBC. This e-mail is an invitation to become a participant in my master's thesis research.

My research is focused on exploring the experience of choosing to study a master's in counselling psychology degree. There is a need for qualitative research to understand how people make career decisions and what the process is like. Little research exists about why people choose to study counselling in particular.

You are invited to participate in this study if you meet the following criteria:

You are currently enrolled in a master's in counselling psychology program (M.Ed or M.A.) in the Metro Vancouver region of British Columbia (excluding UBC).

#### **OR**

You have recently graduated (within the past year) from a master's in counselling psychology program (M.Ed or M.A.) in the Metro Vancouver region of British Columbia (excluding UBC).

Your participation would involve attending one in person, audio-taped interview with me. In this interview you would share your story of deciding to pursue a master's in counselling psychology degree to the extent you feel comfortable. This interview would be about 1 – 2 hours with an additional commitment to comment on one or two subsequent follow up e-mails. The total time commitment is estimated to be about 2 – 4 hours.

Your confidentiality will be maintained with the utmost care. Since I am a fellow counselling student, we may know each other or come to know each other in a future professional setting. Should we interact in another setting at any point, you will not be identified as a research participant nor shall any personal details revealed in the course of the research be disclosed. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are also free to decline participation or discontinue at any point without negative consequences to your course of study. As a token of appreciation, participants will receive a \$20 gift card to Chapters. If you are potentially interested in participating in this research study, please e-mail me at [research e-mail address omitted] or call me at [researcher's phone number omitted] (confidential voicemail).

Regards,  
Erin

## Appendix B : Consent Form



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL, COUNSELLING  
PSYCHOLOGY, AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

### CONSENT FORM

#### **A narrative inquiry into the decision to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology**

##### **Principal Investigator:**

Dr. William A. Borgen, Ph.D., Professor, Department Head,  
Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education  
University of British Columbia  
[contact information omitted]

##### **Research Committee Members:**

Dr. Norman Amundson, Ph.D., Professor, Area Coordinator  
Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education  
University of British Columbia  
[contact information omitted]

Dr. Marla Buchanan, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Deputy Department Head  
Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education  
University of British Columbia  
[contact information omitted]

##### **Co-Investigator:**

Erin Leach Smith, Master of Arts student, Counselling Psychology Program  
Department of Educational, Counselling Psychology, and Special Education  
University of British Columbia  
[contact information omitted]

##### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how and why people decide to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology. Participants will be asked to share the story of their experience of making this decision in an effort to better understand counselling students' career decision-making process. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a current master's student studying counselling or you have recently graduated (in the past year) from a master's in counselling psychology program.

This research is being conducted as part of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Counselling Psychology. The completed thesis will be publicly accessible, as would any results reported in professional journal articles or research papers and presentations.

**Study Procedures:**

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be in contact with the Co-Investigator on 3 or 4 occasions for an approximate total time commitment of between 2 – 4 hours. You will have a preliminary conversation with the researcher by phone, participate in an audio-taped interview for about 1 - 2 hours, and lastly, read over and comment on written summaries sent by e-mail.

The main purpose of the preliminary conversation is to allow you to ask any questions you may have about the study, to ensure you meet the criteria to participate and for the Co-Investigator to explain the process of informed consent. You will have at least 24 hours to review the informed consent form before deciding if you wish to participate and schedule an interview time.

During the research interview, you will be asked open questions to describe the experience of deciding to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology. Prior to the interview, you will be invited to create a timeline to guide you as you speak about this experience. The research interview is going to be audio-recorded and will last between 1 – 2 hours in total.

Several weeks after the interview, you will be e-mailed a document containing a summary of the research interview. You will be invited to offer feedback on the contents of this summary and you will decide if there is anything you wish to change or remove. The Co-Investigator will implement your feedback into the final summary. You will also be e-mailed a list of the themes generated from the research data and asked to provide comments.

There will be no impact on your academic program should you choose to participate in this study or decline to participate at any point.

**Potential Risks:**

This research poses risks such as:

- a) Feeling uncomfortable or distressed as a result of speaking about past experiences
- b) Potential dual relationship with the Co-Investigator

There will be several procedures in place to minimize these risks. The participant will maintain control over how much they wish to disclose about their experience and will have the option to stop the interview or skip a topic at any point. Should a participant become distressed while speaking about their experience, the Co-Investigator will address the matter immediately and provide referrals to campus counselling services.

Confidentiality will be maintained with the utmost care. Should the Co-Investigator and a research participant interact in another setting at any point, they will not be identified as a research participant nor shall any personal details revealed in the course of the research be disclosed.

**Potential Benefits:**

The possible benefits to research participants include:

- a) Gaining greater awareness and understanding of past experiences
- b) New insights into your career decision-making process and reasons for studying counselling.

The results of this research may also add to the existing literature about career decision-making and could potentially be used by career counsellors to make changes to their practice.

**Confidentiality:**

The contents of the research interview will be accessible only to the Principal Investigator (Dr. Borgen), the Co-Investigator (Erin Leach Smith) and the members of the Co-Investigator's research committee (Dr. Amundson and Dr. Buchanan). Should the Co-Investigator choose to use the services of a professional transcriptionist to transcribe the audio-taped interviews, this professional will also agree to maintain confidentiality. The audio recordings and research data documents will be identified by code and not by the name of the participant. Individual participant names and other identifying information, including any third parties disclosed during the interview, will not be included in the final thesis or any other reports on the study. You will choose a pseudonym to be used in the written report of findings. Despite these efforts to maintain anonymity, it is possible that the unique information you share during the research could identify you. Electronic data will be password protected and hard copies kept in a locked filing cabinet in the Neville Scarfe Education building on the UBC campus. Audio recordings will be erased at the conclusion of the thesis and hard copies of data destroyed after 5 years.

**Contact for information about the study:**

If you have any questions or concerns, or would like more information about this research study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. William A. Borgen, [contact information omitted]

The results of this study will be available to you upon completion. If you would like a copy of a report on the findings, please fill out the contact information below, particularly an e-mail or mailing address.

**Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:** If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail to [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca).

**Consent:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to your standing within your counselling master's degree program.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

---

Participant Signature

Date

---

Printed Name of the Participant

---

Telephone

---

E-Mail &/or Mailing Address

## Appendix C : Demographic Questionnaire

You are invited to complete the following questionnaire. This information is voluntary and you may decline to answer any question that you wish.

(1) Age:

(2) Ethnic origin:

(3) Gender:

(4) Degree sought (i.e. M.Ed or M.A.) and year of master's program (e.g. first year, second year etc.)

(5) Previous degree(s):

(6) Current or previous occupation (s):

## **Appendix D : Interview Guide**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this interview is to better understand how people come to decide to study towards a master's in counselling psychology degree.

Over the course of our interview, I will ask you to tell me the story of how you decided to study counselling. We will refer to your timeline, if you created one, to guide to you. I may ask for more information or clarification throughout the interview to make sure I fully understand.

Take all the time you need to think about and answer my questions. Please speak freely about your experience, but you do not have to share anything you do not feel comfortable with.

Your participation is voluntary and you can stop the interview or recording at any time.

Before we begin, do you have any questions?

We will begin the interview now.

### **Main Interview Question**

Please tell me the story of your decision-making to pursue a master's in counselling psychology degree.

### **Possible Follow- Up Questions**

- This timeline shows the key points which led you to be a master's in counselling psychology student. Where would you like to begin?
- What was next?
- Is there anything that has occurred to you during this interview that you would like to add to your timeline?
- How does this master's program fit with your future life goals?
- If you were to choose a metaphor to describe your experience of deciding to pursue a master's degree in counselling psychology, what would it be?

### **Sample Probes**

- What led you to write that down on your timeline?
- Tell me how that was important to you.
- What made that significant to your decision?
- How did that situation impact your decision-making?
- Could you tell me more about that?
- How did that lead you towards counselling specifically?



## **Appendix E : Participant Check of Narrative Accounts E-mail**

Hello,

It's been a few weeks since we met for our research interview so I hope you had an enjoyable summer. I am contacting you to now for the next step in your participation. As I mentioned when we met, after your interview was transcribed verbatim, I was to create a summary of the story of how you decided to pursue a master's in counselling psychology degree as told when we met. It is essentially what I think you said about my research question.

I have completed your narrative summary and have attached it to this e-mail for your review and edits. It is an important step in my research process to create opportunity for you to collaborate on and verify the accuracy of my summary. I have a few points for you to keep in mind as you read it, and some questions to guide your review:

Points to keep in mind:

- I took a transcript that was between 15 – 20 pages long and condensed it to only 2 -3 pages, concentrating on the aspects of our conversation that directly relate to my research question
- To create a cohesive narrative for the reader, I have arranged events in chronological order which may be different from the order in which we spoke about things
- Capitalized words are those that were verbally emphasized in the interview
- As much as possible I have used your exact wording, but I have also added some introductory sentences so the story flows smoothly and condensed some thoughts. If the words I have added do not “sound” like you, feel free to put it in your own way.
- If it is helpful for your review, I can send you your interview transcript as well
- Once you have given the edits you wish to include, this final 2 -3 page narrative will be included in full in my thesis document

As you are reading your narrative summary, please ask yourself these questions:

- What pseudonym do I wish to use? Please choose a name by which I can refer to you in my thesis document. It is so much nicer to have a name than to call you “Participant #”.
- Does this summary adequately represent my experience as described?
- Is that what I meant?
- Are there details or sequence of events that are not correct?
- Are there details I should remove to protect my identity? For example, while the names of people and universities have been removed, I kept the names of countries/cities where experiences happened to give the reader a sense of the cultural context. However, this could reduce your anonymity so please change any location information you wish.

You can make changes directly into the document I sent you. You can add, change and omit what you wish. Unfortunately, the narrative must stay within the 2 -3 page limit. Please just highlight the changes you make in a different colour font and note if something was taken out. Save the document and return it to me by e-mail. There is no obligation to make changes, if it looks good as is then just let me know that. Of course, don't hesitate to phone or e-mail me as you go if questions come up.

If it is at all possible, I am hoping to have narrative summaries returned to me in the next 2 -3 weeks, as these are needed for my next step of looking for cross-narrative themes. Overall, I respect that this is your life and your story so I want you to feel that the final narrative summary reflects you more than me.

Thank you once again,  
Erin Smith

## Appendix F : Participant Check of Cross-narrative Themes E-mails

Hello,

I hope this e-mail finds you well and having a nice autumn. I am contacting you for the last part of your participation in my research study. This is the least time-consuming part as you will simply be sharing your impressions of some cross-narrative themes. It should take no longer than 30 minutes.

The procedure is slightly different than what I initially described when we met. I misunderstood how a part of my research method is typically done. I shared with you I would e-mail out ALL of the cross-narrative themes relevant to ALL participants. In fact, at this point you only review the cross-narrative themes applicable to YOUR narrative. You will have a chance to read them all in my final thesis. Sorry about the confusion. Essentially, a cross-narrative theme is something that I interpreted as a common thread/topic running through several participant decision-making experiences, as told during the research interview. I'm asking for your feedback to give you an opportunity to share if my interpretation fits in your view.

Attached are two documents: one describing the draft themes relevant to your narrative and the other is the final version of your narrative summary (with your changes included). You only really need to read the themes document. The narrative is attached just to refresh your memory if you wish, since our interview was a number of months ago.

As you read the themes, keep in mind these 3 questions which you will answer:

- Are the themes **comprehensive**? Are they full enough to capture the experience as described in our interview? Do they cover what was in your narrative?
- Do the themes **resonate**? Can you “feel” yourself in the themes, or could you see how other counselling students might fit with the themes?
- Are the themes **pragmatic**? Do the themes have practical value for the field of counselling psychology? Could they be useful for people deciding to pursue a master's in counselling psychology degree?

You simply need to write a sentence or two in response to each question in a reply to this e-mail. You are answering for the themes OVERALL, not for each one individually. In terms of a timeline to get back to me, I have some tight deadlines to be ready for my thesis defense date in early December. So I am requesting your reply within the next two weeks, by Friday November 11th. I understand this e-mail might be landing in your inbox at a busy time for you too, so if it is likely you will not be able to respond in time please let me know.

Thanks again for your time and participation,  
Erin

Hi Again;

Sorry to bother you with another e-mail, but comments from a couple of participants have led me to believe some clarification would be helpful.

As you review the themes relevant to your narrative, keep in mind that some of the themes might be immediately recognizable in your narrative and some might seem less obviously connected. For example, if in your narrative you mentioned your family or friends in relation to your decision-making, even if it was only one comment and not a central aspect of your experience, I coded you into the cross-narrative theme "Influence of Family, Social Group and Society". There may also be aspects of the theme description that don't apply to you at all.

That being said, if there are themes that I've listed for you that you really don't see as a fit for your narrative, include that in your comments. That's part of the reason for this check. Don't hesitate to contact me with questions as needed.

Thanks,  
Erin