USING LIFE REVIEW TO FACILITATE BEGINNING COUNSELLORS' PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

By

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ABSTRACT

Personal development for helping professionals is imperative for maintaining competent and ethical practices with clients and for counsellors' own emotional well being. Not to be confused with personal therapy, personal development is defined in terms of particular personal attributes or qualities; the enhancement of which are relevant for counselling others. Despite the benefits of personal development and ethical guidelines of the profession, the value of personal development has not generally been part of the culture of counselling practice or a part of university training programs in Canada, including counsellor education at the University of British Columbia. The purpose of this study was to address this issue by developing a program for fostering the personal development of graduate students in counselling psychology that could be included in the Master's curriculum and then to conduct an exploratory evaluation of that program. The overall intention of this research is to be able to provide a psychologically safe venue for facilitating graduate students' personal development so that this could be made available to Master's students in university and other counsellor training programs.

The Personal Development through Life Review program was designed to offer first-year Master's students structured small group experiences that encourage self-reflection and feedback from peers. A pilot of this program was conducted with five first year students in counselling psychology. These students met as a group with an experienced group facilitator from the community for nine sessions of life review. Evaluation of this pilot project was guided by two general research questions. Firstly, what benefits to their personal development did the participants attribute to the life
review group experience, and secondly, how can the life review group experience be improved to better facilitate the participants' personal development. A qualitative case study approach was used to elicit the rich detail necessary to investigate these questions.

The findings from this research showed that the students involved found the experience to be very positive. Fifteen themes that emerged from analysis of narrative summaries of individual feedback interviews with participants related to benefits attributed to the life review group including: Felt the group was a safe venue for experimenting with self-disclosure, group members modeled taking risks and self-disclosing, opportunity to experience what the students had learned about in theory, students reflected on their life review group experiences in terms of counselling others/leading groups, peers in the life review group became a support network, acceptance of positive feedback, gained new awareness of self, aspects of self are validated, highlighted or confirmed, affirmation of non-judgmental stance and individual differences, seeing self in lives of others, learned from each other's experiences, reframing of negative life events and experiences, feeling some resolution about issues and aspects of self, highlighted aspects of self that could be explored further, and timeliness. There were also three themes that emerged relating to suggestions as to how to improve the life review group experience: Include more group sessions or make an ongoing group, space in the group process for further exploration, and make life review group available for other Master's students. Although exploratory, several of these thematic results showed that the life review method appears to offer a means to facilitate personal development in students as a component of counsellor training.
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Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope.

Nothing that is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context; therefore, we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love.

-Reinhold Niebuhr (1952)

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And to my sunshine, Genevieve, I love you very much.
Chapter I

THE PROBLEM

Come then, and let us pass a leisure hour in storytelling, and our story shall be the education of our heroes.

-Plato, The Republic

Introduction

The general intention of this study was to be able to provide a program for fostering beginning counsellor's personal development that could be made available to students in the Masters in counselling psychology program at the University of British Columbia and in other counsellor education programs. In the context of the field of counselling psychology, personal development is conceived of as a purposeful, ongoing process that includes increasing one's self-awareness, openness to learning, objectivity, openness to feedback from others, and self-care (Hackney & Cormier, 1996; Irving & Williams, 1999; Jennings & Shovholt, 1999; Johns, 1996). As part of this study a program was designed to facilitate the personal development of master's students and piloted with a group of graduate students in counselling psychology as participants. The story of this research project, its development and outcomes provides the basis for this thesis. In this chapter I provide the background and rationale for the research as well as its purpose, definitions of the terms used, a description of the personal development through life review program and my research approach.

Background and Rationale

Personal development helps assure that counsellors provide a competent and ethical practice for their clients (Johns, 1996). While counsellors are not expected to be perfectly well-adjusted at all times, they are better able to discriminate the appropriateness
of their feelings and behaviors when working with clients; clarify boundaries in the therapeutic relationship; and see the need for referral with personal development (Hermann, 1997; Wheeler, 1996). When counsellors provide for ongoing self-reflection and self-care they are thus more capable of building counselling relationships for the benefit of their clients and not their own needs and remain within a relevant code of ethical practice (Johns).

Additionally, counsellors themselves need to be protected from the negative effects of helping others. Researchers and clinicians in the field have stressed the risks and effects of secondary trauma for helping professionals (e.g. Arvay, 1999; Arvay & Uhlemann, 1996; Briere, 1996). Counsellors who empathically engage with clients as they tell their stories may feel the same fear, pain and distress as their clients and develop their own stress reactions as a result (Sexton, 1999). Characterized by episodes of sadness and depression, sleeplessness, general anxiety, irritability and an inability to concentrate as well as a host of other ailments typically associated with posttraumatic stress, this constellation of symptoms found in counsellors can be linked back to work with traumatized clients (Figley, 1995). Referred to in the literature variously as compassion stress, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and secondary traumatic stress, researchers have more recently begun to focus on these detrimental stress reactions in counsellors and other helpers working with survivors of trauma and the need for this issue to be recognized and addressed. To prepare for and mitigate these effects, helping professionals are encouraged to increase their awareness and knowledge of their own personal issues
and have a commitment to engage in self-care practices such as peer supervision and consultation (Dutton & Rubinstein, 1995).

It follows, given the above, that training programs seeking to promote optimal counsellor competence and ethical practices, as well as be proactive in consideration of the risks of secondary trauma, would highlight and encourage personal development for students. In Britain where professional bodies such as the British Association for Counselling and the British Psychological Society have established the necessity of personal development as part of professional practice and counsellor training, the debate in the literature focuses on the best way to meet these requirements (Irving & Williams, 1999). The program accrediting bodies in the United States and Canada have also recommended that students be given opportunities for personal development as part of university training programs. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) that accredited the University of British Columbia’s Masters program, for example, acknowledges the need for personal development by stating in the Program Objectives and Curriculum: “Students have the opportunity and are encouraged to participate in workshops, seminars, or other activities that contribute to personal and professional development” (CACREP, 1994). In addition, the Counselling Psychology Program Handbook for the program at the University of British Columbia also states this recognition and that the program is committed to the development of students’ “intellectual, physical and emotional potential” and “assumes major responsibility for the training of counsellors, counselling psychologists and researchers in
the counselling field” (Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology & Special Education, 1999).

Still, at this time, a means for personal development is not included in the counselling psychology programs in most training programs in Canada including the University of British Columbia. Part of the neglect in this area could be the misconception regarding personal development as synonymous with personal therapy (Irving & Williams, 1999), and related ethical concerns particularly in regard to dual relationships between faculty and students (McEwan & Duncan, 1993). Motivated students are thus expected to seek resources for personal development outside of the curriculum at their own expense. This means that given the limited financial resources of most students, their personal development may be compromised. It can also be argued that this creates an environment that tacitly dismisses the counselling psychology programs’ support of and commitment to the importance of personal development for their students. To address this discrepancy there is a need for a viable, psychologically safe and ethical means for facilitating masters students personal development that could be made available as part of the curriculum for counsellor education in graduate programs.

Purpose of the Study

This research involves an exploratory evaluation of a program that utilizes the group-based life review method to facilitate the personal development of counselling psychology students. A pilot of the program was conducted with five first-year masters students who met with an experienced facilitator from the community for nine, two-hour
sessions of life review. Evaluation of the pilot project was guided by two general research questions. Firstly, what benefits to their personal development did the participants attribute to the life review group experience? Second, how could the life review group experience be improved to better facilitate the participants' personal development? The life review program and my research approach are further described following the definition of terms used in this study.

Definition of Terms

At the beginning of this chapter I first introduced the general definition of personal development as used in this study because the term “personal development” has connotations in the field of counselling psychology that have resulted in misconceptions and confusion (Irving & Williams, 1999). What follows is a further elaboration of the definition of personal development that was derived from research showing the characteristics of effective therapists (e.g. Hackney & Cormier, 1996; Jennings & Shovholt, 1999), and generally accepted definitions of personal development in the literature (e.g. Irving & Williams, 1999; Johns, 1996). As well, I provide some clarification regarding the term “life review” that is also used in this work.

In the field of counselling psychology, personal development is understood to be a purposeful process concerned with specific aspects of the counsellor’s person that are considered relevant for effective work with clients. It is thus distinguishable from other terms such as “personal therapy” which refers to one means by which personal development may occur and related to the more generic term “personal growth” which
may result from efforts to develop personal aspects of one-self. For counsellors, the emphasis in personal development is on the process of enhancing one’s self-awareness, openness to learning, objectivity, openness to feedback from others and self-care. These terms are further delineated below.

Enhancing one’s self-awareness specifically includes an increased awareness of one’s own needs and motivations for entering the counselling field; being able to distinguish between one’s own needs and the client’s; and relate how one’s motivations for helping others may influence therapeutic relationships. Enhancing self-awareness also specifically relates to being able to identify one’s personal strengths, challenges and coping skills, in addition to having a sense of how one’s emotional health may impact the quality of one’s work with clients.

Openness to learning includes a general open-mindedness and willingness to experiment with new or different approaches to therapy and an appreciation for alternative worldviews. Increasing one’s objectivity specifically includes a greater awareness of one’s biases that could interfere in forming a helpful therapeutic relationship with clients. Being more open to feedback relates to ongoing self-assessment and increasing one’s emotional and intellectual receptivity. It involves an ability to be more self-reflective, coming from a position of curiosity rather than knowing and decreasing defensiveness. Lastly, self-care includes a commitment to maintaining one’s own emotional well-being. It involves having a plan in place for self-reflection and exploration such as journal writing, creative endeavors, personal therapy, peer consultation or supervision. It also
means having such things as exercise and spiritual practices built into one’s lifestyle along with a strong support network.

Because the term “life review” was popularly known and readily understood by my peers, I chose to use this term in the context of this research project. In using the term “life review”; however, I would like to stress that I am specifically referring to the group-based process delineated by Birren & Deutchman (1991) and deVries, Birren & Deutchman (1995) which these researchers and others in the field (e.g. Brown-Shaw, Westwood & deVries, 1999) have referred to as “guided autobiography”. For simplicity I continue throughout this work to use the term “life review” or “group-based life review” when referring to this process.

**Personal Development through Life Review**

**Overview**

Personal Development through Life Review is a program that provides first-year master’s students with a small group experience that is designed to foster their personal development. The groups have a minimum of five and a maximum of eight members and are led by professionals from the community with advanced experience both in group leadership and the life review method and no other affiliation with the students (to avoid dual relationship issues). It is proposed that this program be offered as a special topics course (565- Special course in subject matter field) as part of the curriculum in counselling psychology at the University of British Columbia. Although students would,
therefore, have to register for the program, assessment would be based only on attendance
("complete") or non-attendance ("incomplete").

In this program, group-based life review provides the structured framework for the
students' personal development. Although the program is not intended to be therapy, the
group-based life review approach does have the therapeutic effect of furthering self-
exploration and allowing for feedback from peers. The students meet with the group
facilitator for ten, two-hour sessions of life review. The life review follows the process
delineated by Birren & Deutchman (1991), and entails each of the students writing
autobiographical essays on pre-selected themes at home and then reading these essays
aloud in the group session. For each of the themes students are provided with sensitizing
questions to aid in approaches to and the potential content of the themes. Although
students can write as much as they feel comfortable with, students are encouraged to read
brief, two page accounts in the group. After each student's reading, the other group
members are given the opportunity for comments and norms are established in the group
as to how this feedback is given (see appendices).

Program Goals and Objectives

The goals of the program include providing a safe environment for students' self-
exploration and to further students' commitment to attending to their personal
development through personal therapy, group therapy, peer group consultation,
supervision and other self-care practices. The objectives of the program are outlined
below.
As a result of this program the student will be able to:

1. Report an increased awareness of their own needs and motivations for helping others.

2. Report an increased emotional receptivity as defined by being more self-aware, reflective, non-defensive and open to feedback.

3. Identify their personal strengths, challenges and coping skills.

4. Specify a plan for maintaining their emotional well-being.

5. Understand, through an experiential process of doing and reflecting, what is involved in the personal process of change.

6. Relate how their emotional health enhances or distracts from their effectiveness as a counsellor.

7. Have an opportunity to experience and observe small group process and to extrapolate these observations to their own group leading as professionals.

**Topical Outline**

**Week 1: Introduction**

Based on the model developed by Borgen, Pollard, Amundson & Westwood (1989), in the initial group sessions students engage in an introductory activity to become oriented to each other and the facilitator, goals and norms of the group are established, responsibilities of the group members clarified and confidentiality guidelines addressed. The facilitator also reviews the expected behaviors regarding the giving and receiving of feedback. In addition, the group members are introduced to the life review method and discuss the theme assignment for the next week.
The following eight sessions are all based on the same format. Sessions consist of a brief discussion of the next session’s theme to be written at home in advance, and the group members’ reading and discussion of the life stories written in preparation for the current session. The theme assignments as recommended by Birren & Deutchman (1994) are as follows:

- Week 2: The major branching points of my life
- Week 3: My family
- Week 4: My career or major life work
- Week 5: My health and body image
- Week 6: The loves and hates over my life time
- Week 7: My sexual identity, sex roles, and sexual experiences
- Week 8: My experiences with death and ideas about dying
- Week 9: My aspirations, life goals, and the meaning of my life

The final group session consists of a closing activity and feedback on the program. In the weeks that follow the facilitator will also engage in individual debriefing sessions with each group member. This will provide an opportunity for referrals to other resources if students request them.

**Program Strengths**

One of the strengths of the personal development through life review program is that it fosters peer support. Many students entering the master’s program work at their studies part time. Some of these students have expressed feelings of alienation because of
their minimal contact with other students. The life review groups promote a sense of belonging with other students and will help students feel connected to the master’s program and their peers.

The life review groups will also provide an opportunity for normalizing beginning students’ experience of transition to graduate work. For most adults, entering a program of graduate study begins a period of unavoidable transition with associated difficulties related to family and occupational adjustments as well as changes in financial situations, support networks and living conditions (Bowman, Bowman & Delucia, 1990). The life review groups give students a venue to share their experiences with one another and feel supported.

Additionally, as mentioned above, the program gives students a chance to request referrals to outside resources if they need them. During the life review experience students may identify issues that they wish to explore further in individual or group therapy. Throughout the program and particularly at the conclusion of the program, opportunities will arise for students to make such referral requests.

Lastly, the students will also experience the life review approach that they may then decide to pursue further in their own work with clients. Experiencing a different intervention as part of their own process may also become an incentive for students to be creative in their work with clients.
Research Approach

Because the evaluation of this pilot program is exploratory in nature, it was well suited to case study and qualitative methodology. The case study can be useful as a prelude to further study and allows one to preserve the “holistic and meaningful characteristics” of experience (Yin, 1984, p.14). The research questions asked necessitated in-depth interviewing in order to build enough trust with the participants to allow their perspectives on their own personal development and the life review group experience to emerge. In depth interviews can lead to the uncovering of the tacit aspects, unanticipated program outcomes and to rich, detailed descriptions of the participant’s experience (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

In addition, qualitative research, particularly from a narrative perspective, assumes that the researcher is the research instrument (Bailey, 1996) and that it is not possible to be neutral and objective; rather the researcher and participant “develop meaning together” (Reissman, 1993, p.55). Inquiry is thus an interactive process with the open recognition that the researcher is collaboratively constructing the participants’ reality, not just passively recording and reporting (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). There is also the open recognition from a narrative stance, that the research interview is a specific social situation in which personal narratives are produced in conversations that are “the product of a particular interview context, a dialogue between a particular teller and listener in a relation of power, at a particular historical moment” (Reissman, p. 31). The attention to context and the co-construction of meaning that is highlighted from a narrative standpoint provided an appropriate theoretical background for this study; especially since this study
involved the exploratory evaluation of a program which facilitates the sharing and co-construction of life stories among peers and an interview context between peers (the researcher and group participants).

For this study, then, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with each group participant from the pilot program following the conclusion of the life review group. Descriptive narratives were written from the interviews as a way of reducing the original interview transcriptions; these narratives were validated by the participants; and then analyzed following the steps delineated by Miles & Huberman (1994). The resulting themes are presented along with the descriptive narratives in Chapter IV.
Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tell me and I may forget.
Show me and I may remember.
Involve me and I will understand.
-Proverb

Introduction

Knowledge that is acquired by direct experiencing almost always has more impact than knowledge that is simply presented by others (Borgen, Pollard, Amundson & Westwood (1989). It follows that beginning counsellors are more likely to realize the importance of self-exploration and self-care if they are given and have opportunities available for these experiences. In this section I highlight the literature and discuss why personal development is vital for counsellors; and, why opportunities for personal development should be offered as part of counsellor training including issues related to competency and effectiveness, secondary traumatic stress and ethical considerations. I then specifically explore the literature related to personal development in counsellor training, and the group-based life review method, which offers a means for facilitating Master’s students’ personal development.

The effective helper

An essential component of successful counselling is the creation of a safe therapeutic environment and a trusting relationship between the client and counsellor (Sexton, 1999). Carl Rogers (1992) long espoused that a client’s relationship with a therapist who is “freely and deeply himself” is one of the conditions “necessary and
sufficient” for therapeutic change to occur (p. 828). Clinicians and researchers in the field have generally agreed that a therapist’s personal characteristics have a significant effect on the therapeutic relationship that is formed and thus the outcomes of therapy (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999); and, research has shown that a counsellor’s personal qualities can enhance or detract from the counselling process and are as essential, if not more so, than specific counselling skills in helping clients (Hackney & Cormier, 1996). In fact, the counsellor’s “self” is often referred to as the principle “tool” or instrument in helping others (Johns, 1996). Although many clinicians would argue that various counselling interventions are important as well for positive therapeutic outcomes, there is no doubt that the person of the counsellor directly impacts the therapeutic relationship and effective counselling practice.

Furthermore, researchers have identified the specific personal characteristics associated with effective therapists. Hackney & Cormier (1996) describe qualities related to the person of the therapist such as self-awareness and understanding, good psychological health, sensitivity to cultural issues in self and others, open-mindedness, objectivity and trustworthiness that generally enable counsellors to be more competent in therapeutic practice. Hackney & Cormier highlight, for example, the personal qualities such as self-awareness and objectivity that safeguard against and aid counsellors in the recognition of counterproductive emotional reactions to clients and the entanglement of the counsellor’s own needs in the therapeutic relationship. Sometimes referred to as “countertransference”, these issues can become manifest in several ways including over-identification with client problems; a desire to form friendships with clients; and the
development of romantic or sexual feelings towards clients (Hackney & Cormier). If not addressed these issues will not only interfere with the therapeutic process, but can have devastating consequences for both the client and counsellor (Morrissette, 1996). Hackney & Cormier suggest that counsellors who are more self-aware and objective will be more likely to identify when they have become emotionally over-involved with clients, know when to refer clients and seek support for themselves. These counsellors will thus be better able to maintain a competent and ethical practice with their clients (Johns, 1996).

Additionally, certain personal qualities of therapists, including a dedication to self-care, have also been associated with being “the best of the best” in the counselling profession. Jennings & Skovholt (1999) researched the characteristics of therapists considered outstanding by their professional colleagues. The ten “master therapists” identified by a purposeful sampling method were interviewed in depth; and, the researchers found that these therapists engaged in personal therapy, peer consultation and supervision to obtain various sources of feedback and heighten their awareness of themselves and others. The master therapists were also concerned about how their emotional health affected their work, and attended to their own emotional well-being through personal therapy, exercise and the practice of spirituality. The researchers conclude: “Becoming a master therapist is more than just an accumulation of time and experience. The master therapists in this sample seem to continuously capitalize on and proactively develop a number of characteristics in an effort to improve professionally” (p. 9). These characteristics including cognitive attributes (cognitive complexity and commitment to learning); emotional attributes (self aware, reflective, non-defensive, open
and relational attributes (highly developed social skills) were enhanced through the seeking of "opportunities for continuous learning, feedback and reflection" (p. 10). As a result of this study, Jennings & Skovholt recommend that counsellor training programs "strive to provide a learning environment to develop these desirable characteristics further in their trainees" (p. 10) and encourage beginning counsellors to attend to their own emotional well-being.

In conclusion, counsellors need to engage in personal development for their clients as well as their own benefit. It is the counsellor's responsibility to ensure that the counselling process is productive and beneficial for the client; thus, it is the counsellor's responsibility to be as aware as possible of his or her own emotional health, concerns, and behaviors and their effect on the therapeutic relationship (Briere, 1996). As highlighted by Wheeler (1996), counsellors are not expected to be perfectly well balanced at all times; however, personal development for counsellors is important "so that they are able to give their full attention" to clients and the counselling process and therefore ensure competent and ethical therapeutic practices (p. 177). The need for counsellors to attend to countertransference reactions that can at the very least be counterproductive to the therapeutic process, and that are not always easily identified, makes personal development all the more crucial (Sexton, 1999). Highly successful therapists actively pursue the improvement of the personal qualities that are associated with effective helping and engage in self-care practices. It would make sense that training programs for counsellors would seek to provide opportunities for beginning counsellors to do the same.
The issue of secondary traumatic stress

Trauma is contagious.
-Judith Herman (1997)

The need for attention to personal development for those in the mental health profession is all the more urgent given the more recent findings regarding secondary traumatic stress. Because of prevalence of trauma, counsellors will often find themselves working with people who have experienced violence or have been victimized (Schauben & Frazier, 1995). Current research shows, for example, that in North America, as many as one in five women will be raped in their lifetime, and one in four women as well as one in six men were sexually abused as a child (Briere, 1996; Schauben & Frazier).

Researchers are finding that for those who help people who have experienced trauma “there is a cost to caring” (Figley, 1995, p.1). Counsellors who empathically engage with their clients are likely to develop their own traumatic symptoms related to their client’s traumatic material (Sexton, 1999). There are various terms that have been used in the literature to describe the deleterious effects on those in helping professions such as secondary traumatic stress, compassion stress, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. Although some researchers distinguish between these concepts in relation to the onset of symptoms, whether progressive or emerging suddenly with little warning (e.g. Figley, 1995), the symptoms themselves are similar regardless of onset and parallel those most often associated with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

The toll that secondary traumatic stress can take on counsellors, clients and the community at large is considerable. The personal cost to counsellors who experience STS can include intrusive imagery of client’s material; distressing emotions (irritability,
anxiety, depression); inability to concentrate; cynicism and disillusionment; addictive or compulsive behaviors; impairment of day to day functioning in social and personal roles (e.g. social withdrawal); and various somatic complaints including fatigue, sleep difficulties, headaches, gastrointestinal distress and heart palpitations (Dutton & Rubinstein, 1995). There is also a cost to clients and society in general: “The therapist’s adverse reaction, unless understood and contained, also predictably leads to disruptions in the therapeutic alliance with clients and to conflict with professional colleagues” (Herman, 1997, p. 141). Pearlman & Saakvitne (1995) emphasize that when STS is not addressed, the counsellor’s psychological needs can become more focal in the therapeutic alliance than the client’s needs: “This imbalance can result in violations of the therapeutic frame and boundaries” re-victimizing clients (p. 157). These researchers stress that counsellor impairment as a result of STS can lead to a dehumanizing attitude towards clients and mistreatment of clients that in turn diminishes the profession and erodes the public’s faith.

Although researchers contend that STS is an unavoidable occupational hazard that will likely affect all counsellors working in the field (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995); studies have generally shown that counsellors with less experience in the field and a higher proportion of survivors of trauma in their caseloads report more symptoms of STS (Arvay & Uhleman, 1996; Neumann & Gamble, 1995; Pearlman & MacIan, 1995). Pearlman & MacIan propose that this could be the result of self-selection with most distressed therapists eventually leaving therapeutic practice; however, they also note that the beginning counsellors in their study tended to be working in hospitals and were less likely to be receiving support. Only 17% of those therapists in their sample working in
hospitals where the most acutely distressed clients would seek treatment were receiving any supervision. Arvay & Uhlemann (1996) also found that only 4% of the counsellors in their sample who were experiencing the most distress (who also tended to be the less experienced counsellors, with the heaviest case load of trauma survivors) were receiving supervision, 13% personal therapy and only 26% peer support. An alarming picture emerges of practitioners new to the field, suffering with STS, and not having or seeking adequate support to process their reactions.

This is truly unfortunate considering that if addressed proactively the effects of STS can be ameliorated (Brady, Guy, Poelstra & Brokaw, 1999). Along with creating organizational cultures that acknowledge and normalize STS reactions and offer practical support as well as opportunities for counsellors to process the impact of their clients’ traumatic material, Sexton (1999) discusses various individual strategies for managing the effects of STS. For example, counsellors need to accept that STS is a normal response to exposure to traumatic material and seek support:

- Therapists need to learn to (a) identify their own reactions and those salient themes that elicit strong countertransference reactions; (b) develop awareness of their own specific somatic signals of distress; (c) understand the early warning signs of vicarious traumatization in themselves; (d) accurately name and articulate their own trauma-related inner experience and feelings (p.399).

Counsellors need to be aware that it is important to maintain a fulfilling personal life; attending to emotional, physical and spiritual needs; and using activities such as art,
writing, music, exercise, and hobbies for rejuvenation. Creating a network of peer support
with other counsellors in the field is also very important. Also essential for a counsellor's
"self-care and professional accountability is to arrange regular supervision or consultation,
regardless of his or her level of experience" (p.400). According to many researchers in
the field, secondary traumatic stress can avoided or its effects ameliorated if therapists
engage in personal development, seek regular supervision and peer consultation (Lerney,
1995).

Researchers also point out that counsellor training programs need to address both
prevention and coping strategies for STS and make personal development an important
component of counsellor education (Brady, Guy, Poelstra & Brokaw, 1999). Students
need to made aware of the effects of STS: "Normalizing this phenomenon may help
students overcome the stigma of therapist distress and, possibly, impairment so that proper
treatment will be sought when necessary" (Brady et al, p. 390). Ensuring that students
establish preventative measures and coping methods early in their careers is critical
Researchers suggest that students be encouraged in developing social and peer support as
well as self-care plans (Yassen, 1995). Students need to understand that "awareness and
monitoring of personal issues are essential for both identifying and responding effectively
to STS reactions" (Dutton & Rubinstein, 1995). Promoting the need for regular
supervision and consultation are imperative as well. In fact, researchers and clinicians
agree that establishing the importance of self-care cannot be emphasized enough, and in
light of the effects of STS, self-care is considered to be a counsellor's ethical
responsibility; a notion that needs to be instilled in beginning counsellors before they enter the field (Neumann & Gamble, 1995).

**Ethical considerations**

Indeed, given the importance of personal development for counsellor competence and issues related to secondary trauma stress, it is not surprising to find that various ethical codes and guidelines in the helping professions emphasize the need for counsellors to attend to themselves (Johns, 1996). It is not only the counsellors own personal responsibility to protect the welfare of clients by engaging in personal development, but is acknowledged to be the responsibility of the discipline itself. The preamble of the Canadian Psychological Associations' Code of Ethics, for example, reminds professionals of the contract that helpers have with the society in which they work:

> This social contract is based on attitudes of mutual respect and trust with society granting support for the autonomy of a discipline in exchange for a commitment by the discipline to *do everything it can* to assure that its members act ethically in conducting the affairs of the discipline within society... (p. 13, emphasis added).

The ethical codes in the helping professions that apply to counsellors and psychologists working in Canada and the United States highlight this need for "proactive ethics" to assure high levels of competence and integrity in the profession (e.g. C.P.A., p. 39). Although it can, therefore, be argued that including opportunities for counsellors' personal development in training programs relates to the general spirit of proactive ethics and directly or indirectly to any and all ethical principles, I will briefly point out some of the
Looking at specific ethical guidelines espoused by the American Psychological Association (A.P.A.), Canadian Psychological Association (C.P.A.), College of Psychologists of British Columbia (C.P.B.C), American Counseling Association (A.C.A.), and Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association (C.G.C.A.), for example, it is clear that helpers' primary obligation is to respect the integrity and promote the well being of clients and maintain high levels of competence and self awareness in order to do so. For instance, under the C.P.A. Code of Ethics, Principle 2: Responsible Caring, therapists:

Engage in self-reflection regarding how their own values, attitudes, experiences and social context...influence their actions, interpretations, choices and recommendations. This is done with the intent of increasing the probability that their activities will benefit and not harm individuals, families, groups and communities... (C.P.A., 1991, p. 41).

Therapists are expected to “strive to be aware of their own belief systems, values, needs, and limitations and the effect of these on their work” (A.P.A., 1992, p. 6) and to understand how their own cultural/ethnic/racial background impacts their values and beliefs about the counseling process (A.C.A., 1995). Therapists are not expected to be value-free, but they are expected to explore and be cognizant of influence of their own background, experiences, stresses and belief systems in order to assure that they are as
objective as possible, maintain high levels of competence and promote their client’s welfare (C.P.A., 1991).

Furthermore, counsellors are expected to “avoid actions that seek to meet their personal needs at the expense of clients” (A.C.A., p. 2) and it follows that counsellors need to engage in personal development to be “continually cognizant of their own needs and their potentially influential position” with clients (C.P.B.C., p. 7). Ethical guidelines in the profession recognize that in the interest of protecting clients, counsellors need to be able to discriminate the appropriateness of feelings and behaviors, relevance of roles and limits and not use the therapeutic relationship to meet their own needs at the client’s expense (C.G.C.A., 1989; Johns, 1996). Ethical codes and guidelines also highlight the need to engage in self-care to make sure helping professionals are aware of their own needs and motivations, and that they act in their client’s best interest (C.P.A., 1991).

In addition, counsellors and other helping professionals are to engage in self-care “to avoid conditions (e.g. burnout, addictions) which could result in impaired judgment and interfere with their ability to benefit and not harm others” (C.P.A., 1991, p. 43). There is a clear recognition in ethical standards and codes that personal development is important to maintain competence and monitor therapeutic effectiveness. A.C.A. (1995) guidelines stress that counsellors “take reasonable steps to seek out peer supervision” and remain “alert to signs of impairment, seek assistance for problems and if necessary, limit, suspend or terminate their professional responsibilities” (p. 2). Helping professionals are to “recognize that personal problems and conflicts may interfere with professional
effectiveness", and they are to engage in self-care to assure competence and maintain the highest standards of their profession (C.P.B.C., p. 2).

In summary, counsellors have a responsibility to their clients, themselves and society in general to engage in personal development, and that responsibility is reflected in ethical guidelines and codes of the profession. It is also an obligation of training programs on behalf of the discipline to prepare students "to be professional counselors first and counseling specialists second" (CACREP, 1994); and, give students opportunities and encouragement for personal development to better prepare them as professionals in view of the standards set in ethical guidelines and codes for the discipline: "Counsellor educators have a particular responsibility to provide environments and experiences in graduate preparation which not only allow for the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also opportunities for personal development" (Paisley & Benshoff, 1998, p.35).

Personal development in counsellor training

Despite ethical considerations and the many espousals of researchers and clinicians in the field that opportunities for personal development should be a part of all counsellor education programs, specific opportunities for personal development are not currently offered as part of graduate education in many training programs in Canada including the University of British Columbia. The research literature seems to reflect this conundrum, with calls for the inclusion of personal development in graduate education programs, discussion of issues involved and various recommendations (e.g. Cushway, 1996; Johns, 1996; Paisley & Benshoff, 1998), but few evaluation studies or exploration
of programs in place (Wheeler, Goldie & Hicks, 1998). Along with a general lack of inclusion of personal development in counsellor training, Wheeler, Goldie & Hicks reveal that this may be a reflection of “a dearth of evaluative frameworks for counsellor training in general” (p. 393). Below I will discuss some of the issues related to personal development in counsellor training as revealed in the literature and recommendations in light of the few studies done on programs that include personal development opportunities for their students.

The main issues in offering personal development opportunities to beginning counsellor relate to self-disclosure. Being able to reveal one’s self to others and thus become transparent to oneself in the process has long been viewed as necessary for emotional well-being (Jourard, 1971). According to Jourard, self-disclosure is essential for personal development and it is the psychological efforts to avoid becoming known that cause individual distress and arrest growth. Several researchers, however, highlight the contradictions related to self-disclosure that are seen in the helping professions and generally reflected in most training programs (Morrisette, 1996).

Primarily, while it would seem that helping professionals are very tolerant of vulnerability in their clients, there is often a perceived intolerance for counsellors’ own vulnerability in the academic culture of the discipline (Cushway, 1996). Beginning counsellors pick up implicit and explicit messages in training programs “that imply that therapists should be above human frailty” (Neuman & Gamble, p. 345); and, because counsellor trainees are selected on the basis of academic and personal qualities in tight competition in most graduate programs, they may feel that they have to “live up to this in
their training” and not display what could be perceived as weaknesses (Cushway, p. 193). So although trainees need to become aware of and expose their vulnerabilities in order to grow professionally, they may limit self-disclosure in the fear that demonstrating human vulnerability will lead to a questioning of their professional competency.

In order to change this stigmatization and create a culture that normalizes counsellor’s expression of distress and promotes of self-care practices, the attitudes and environment in training programs needs to change. Cushway (1996) recommends, for example, that trainers model coping rather than mastery for trainees: “Unless we practice what we preach, our trainees will perceive receiving personal support as a weakness and will fail to incorporate preventative personal support into their working lives” (p. 195). In addition, Cushway recommends that students be offered networks of different kinds of personal support and a venue such as a personal awareness group run by facilitators from outside the training program for the personal development of trainees.

Having a framework for personal development that is facilitated by professionals outside of the faculty of a counsellor education program has been recommended by several researchers in light of the issues and ethical dilemmas related to having faculty present for student self-disclosures. Students may, for example, limit self-disclosure in the presence of faculty because of fears regarding repercussions to revealing personal information (Bradey & Post, 1991), and faculty may want to avoid dual relationships and being caught in an ethical dilemma of having to act on information revealed in student confidences. Furthermore, Bowman, Hatley & Bowman (1995), in a survey of 127
faculty and 247 graduate students in four different CACREP accredited programs, found that students tended to believe that it was unethical for faculty to act on information revealed by trainees in course work or in social settings. Faculty, on the other hand, tended to consider it appropriate to take action in such situations. These researchers also stress that in terms of self-disclosure in the presence of faculty, students are in "a catch-22": On the one hand students may be encouraged to self-disclose their distress and struggles, and on the other, there is a perceived chance that revealing such information to faculty will impact students' success in training (Bowman, Hatley & Bowman, p. 239).

This issue regarding self-disclosure and faculty/student relationships may be one of the reasons that Small & Manthei (1988) have found that students feel free to share more in personal awareness group sessions when faculty who typically run the sessions absent themselves. These researchers report on the results of seventeen years of evaluation and experience with group work in a counsellor training program at a university in New Zealand. Trainees participate in a compulsory, faculty-led, small group experience for personal development as part of their training. During this experience the students are given the opportunity in the final twelve weeks to rotate the leadership while the faculty absent themselves from the group. Feedback from the group participants has shown that the students feel that without the faculty present they could participate more freely, share more readily and feel less concerned about how they come across in the group. These results seem to confirm the notion that students may feel more comfortable in self-exploration and disclosure in an experience that is facilitated by peers or by facilitators from outside of the training program.
The personal development venue offered in the program described by Small & Manthei (1988) is an unstructured group experience, which is often how personal development opportunities have been offered as part of counsellor training (Johns, 1996). According to Hall et al (1999), these small process group experiences as part of counsellor training have been identified as t-groups, sensitivity training, or encounter groups; all having different goals including interpersonal and relationship skills, group therapy, as well as personal development. From a survey of former students over the last 21 years from programs with various compulsory small group experiences these researchers conclude that these experiences appear to “make a strong contribution to both personal development and the enhancement of a range of human relations skills” (p. 112). A low response rate (n=92) and no way to identify the specifics of the various group experiences leave one to caution these results; however, noteworthy from the study is the finding that most of the respondents reported that their group experience was both stimulating and disturbing at the same time with 12% reporting short term distress and 2% of the respondents reporting long term damage. Hall et al relate that the most common criticism of small process group experiences is the possibility of “casualties” (p. 111). Although participation in small process groups has been the traditional approach to offering personal development experiences in counsellor education, particular care needs to be taken to protect participants from possible adverse effects.

Making a small group experience psychologically safe for students is one of the reasons that Johns (1996) recommends structured small group experiences for facilitating
counselling trainees personal development. There are certain advantages to having some systematic approach and activities for self-disclosure in small groups that provides a degree of purpose, aiding some trainee participants in reducing anxiety and the uncertainties prevalent in a less clearly focused group process (Johns). According to Borgen, Pollard, Amundson & Westwood (1989) structured group activities also offer psychological safety because of the boundaries provided by each structured situation. Each activity becomes a complete entity with the consequences of a group participant’s way of being ending with that particular activity. A structured group process thus provides the sense of safety that can make it easier for group participants to engage and disclose at their own pace, with a focus to the sharing of personal information and a form of containment for that disclosure (Johns).

Group-based life review offers a structured small group experience that involves aspects of self-reflection and introspection as well as sharing with and feedback from other group participants. Life review methods have traditionally been researched and used with older adults, particularly in long-term care facilities (Rife, 1998); however, life review has been used successfully with various populations including those experiencing career change (Rife), WWII and Korean War veterans (Molinari & Williams, 1995; Westwood, 1998), and peacekeeping soldiers (Westwood, 1999). A further description of group-based life review and the benefits attributed to the life review experience follows.
Life Review

Life review is a “semi-structured, topical approach” to reviewing one’s life stories and sharing them with others (deVries, Birren & Deutchman, 1995, p.166). As delineated by Birren & Deutchman (1991), life review involves the writing of a series of brief autobiographical essays based on assigned themes and then sharing these accounts in a small group. The themes and accompanying sensitizing questions that are used in life review enhance recall of especially salient experiences and emotions and “productively channel attention” to central issues (deVries, Birren & Deutchman, p. 167). The themes encourage the viewing of various perspectives on one’s life story, and so the life review process has been likened by Birren & Deutchman to shining a light through a nine-sided prism: The light (life story) is refracted differently depending on the side of the prism (life review theme) that it is shone into. Life review thus aids in the change of individual’s “frames of reference and assumptions about the self and others” (Brown-Shaw, Westwood & deVries, 1999, p.112).

A key component of the life review experience is the sharing of the life stories in the small group context. As highlighted by deVries, Birren & Deutchman (1995), the group provides “the opportunity for individuals to see themselves (or their dreams or fears) in the lives of others, recalling events that might have otherwise been forgotten and facilitating the expression of feelings about events that they might have thought were inappropriate” (p. 169). Birren & Deutchman (1991) describe, for example, what they refer to as the “Oh phenomenon” in life review groups. An individual coming into a life review group will often be carrying what he or she perceives of as a “dark secret”:

Some act or feeling from the past that makes one feel separate and unacceptable. Revelation of this secret in the group is often met with little surprise or judgment. In fact, it is often met with similar revelations or simple acceptance. In essence, the other group members say, “Oh, that’s nothing” (p. 51).

Along with the realization of one’s individuality in contrast to others, there is also the discovery of commonalities of experience among group members in life review that help group participants feel accepted and ‘acceptable’ (Birren & Deutchman).

In addition, the private writing in life review allows participants to organize their thoughts and “rehearse what will be shared” in the group; thus, participants can monitor the affectively charged material they choose to reveal (deVries, Birren & Deutchman, p.169). This sense of control participants have over the sharing of their experiences, coupled with the guidelines provided for the feedback they receive from others, make life review a relatively safe framework for people to gain insight into and understanding of themselves, their social relationships and worldview (Brown-Shaw, Westwood & deVries, 1999).

De Vries, Birren & Deutchman (1995) have emphasized that although the life review process encourages self-disclosure and the generation of new perceptions on events, self and others, it needs to be distinguished from group therapy. They see life review as a meaning-making and educational process, whereby one brings “understanding of the past into the present in order to integrate the experiences and events of one’s life.
story" (p.166). It is, therefore, distinct from forms of therapy that actively pursue change in individuals’ behavior, cognitions or emotional responses. However, Birren & Deutchman (1991) and others in the field recognize the therapeutic value of life review because insight, change and the reconciliation of long-standing issues may result from the process. Brown-Shaw, Westwood & de Vries (1999) have also highlighted the therapeutic potential of the process, particularly its self-diagnostic function. Life review can bring to the surface those aspects of the self in need of integration that one can then choose to explore further using other approaches such as therapeutic enactment. While life review promotes increased awareness and recognition of strengths, it is possible for individuals to become more aware of their challenges through this process, particularly unresolved issues or critical incidents that have restricted them from living their lives fully. They may then want to pursue individual or group counselling for these issues.

The therapeutic potential of life review, then, is quite apparent; and, there is a substantial body of research that shows the measurable positive outcomes of the life review method (Silver, 1995). Birren & Deutchman (1991), for example, provide a summary of the benefits from twenty-two different studies that used mostly older adults as participants in life review groups. Results showed some of these positive outcomes include increased sense of personal power and importance; recognition of past adaptive strategies; reconciliation with the past and resolution of past resentments and negative feelings; resurgence of interest in former activities or hobbies; development of friendships with other group members; and increased role clarity, self-esteem, self-understanding, and greater sense of purpose and meaning in life. Other studies with adult populations have
shown the life review experience has positively affected participants' sense of social connectedness, willingness to interact with others and willingness to disclose to others (deVries, Birren & Deutchman, 1995). Life review thus facilitates a process of expanding appreciation and understanding of oneself and others (Brown-Shaw, Westwood & deVries, 1999).

**Summary and conclusion**

Because a counsellor's personal qualities impacts counselling practice and various qualities have been identified that are associated with effective counsellors, it only makes sense that counsellor education programs would seek to provide a learning environment to enhance those qualities in their trainees. It would also make sense that given the very real dangers of secondary traumatic stress reactions in counsellors, that counsellor educators be proactive about these issues and prepare beginning counsellors by encouraging and providing opportunities for personal development. Ethical guidelines and codes in the helping professions also recognize the responsibility of the discipline to ensure that its professionals maintain the highest level of competency as well as a responsibility to protect the welfare of clients, and stress the need for its members to engage in personal development to do so. It would seem to be in the best interests of clients, the public, counsellors and the discipline to offer opportunities for personal development as part of counsellor training.

The literature reveals that the main issues involved in providing opportunities for counsellors' personal development relate to student self-disclosure. The culture of the
discipline in general and graduate training programs in particular has not promoted self-disclosure on the part of beginning counsellors. In order to provide an environment that is conducive to student self-disclosure and avoid ethical dilemmas inherent in faculty/student dual relationships it would seem preferable to not involve faculty in forums for personal development made available in counsellor education. It would also seem preferable to provide more structured group experiences as frameworks for personal development. Care needs to be taken to limit possible adverse consequences to small group interaction, and psychological safety is more apparent in structured activities than in less-focused group experiences.

Group-based life review, then, could offer a relatively safe and effective means for facilitating Master’s students’ personal development. By encouraging self-exploration on pertinent themes such as major branching points, career, family, and values and beliefs, life review provides a framework for students to begin to think about important topical areas and reflect on their life story through the various themes. Students may also benefit from being amongst their peers; be encouraged and supported by each other. Life review has been shown to provide benefits in terms of recognizing individual differences as well as commonalities of experience. Additionally, although not actively pursuing change, life review can be therapeutic and provide a means for students’ to identify aspects and areas of their experience that they wish to explore further using other therapeutic approaches. Research has also shown that along with other benefits life review specifically offers a means to increase self-awareness in terms of individual strengths, challenges and coping skills, and increases individual’s openness and willingness to self-disclose to others.
Therefore, if lead by professional facilitators from outside the students' graduate program with attention taken to offer referral resources to students who wish to seek further exploration, life review would seem to provide a way to offer students an opportunity for personal development as part of their graduate program experience.
Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

"It would be better to come back at the same hour," said the fox, "... if you come back at just any time, I shall never know at what hour my heart is to be ready to greet you. One must observe the proper rites."

-Antoine de Saint Exupery, The Little Prince

Introduction

Although qualitative research may seem like "an unfocused, unplanned desire to go out in the world and hang out or muck around" to those from a more positivistic scientific stance (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 5), qualitative research methods have become recognized as important modes of inquiry with unique strengths when the research to be conducted is exploratory in nature (Yin, 1984). Qualitative methodology, and narrative in particular, is especially useful in allowing the researcher to develop a full description of the research participant's perspective that "preserves their voice" (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 80). This approach also assumes the value of context and pursues a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon in question (Marshall & Rossman, 1995); in this instance, masters' students' experience of the pilot of the personal development through life review program. As much as qualitative research provides flexibility in method with "no canonical approach to interpretative work, no recipes and formulas" (Reissman, 1993, p. 69), my goal in this chapter is to make the research and data analysis process as visible as possible to allow for the necessary, systematic scrutiny of the reader (Bailey, 1996).
Overview

Following the development of the personal development through life review program, a pilot project proposal was put forward and first-year masters students recruited for participation. I engaged a facilitator from the community to lead the group and made arrangements for the group’s meetings. Five students participated in the life review group. The group was conducted on nine Friday afternoons in March through May 2000, meeting in a small conference room in the Counselling Psychology Department at the University of British Columbia. I provided coffee and tea for each of the sessions.

The group sessions followed the original program’s topical outline with the exception that the last week involved an extended session that included both the final life review theme and a closing activity. In addition, the facilitator did not have individual follow-up sessions with the participants as the research interviews were conducted instead. The participants were made aware of resources for referral by the facilitator in session two and encouraged to call her if they felt they wanted to talk about anything further between and following the group sessions. A description of the opening and closing group activities as well as the life review themes used in the group sessions are provided in appendices. In the rest of this chapter the implementation of the pilot program and the qualitative methodology used to conduct an exploratory evaluation of it will be further described including the study design, selection of participants, data collection, and data analysis.
Study Design

A qualitative case study approach was used to frame this research project. As described by Stake (1994), the case study is not so much a methodological choice as "a choice of object to be studied" (p. 236). For this research project the case was defined as the pilot of the personal development through life review program. I chose to conduct interviews with each of the participants to order to elicit the rich detail necessary to investigate the benefits to their personal development that the participants attributed to the life review group and their feedback regarding how the experience could be improved. Descriptive narrative summaries were written from these interviews and presented to the participants in a follow-up session for feedback. Following the verification of the narratives, all the narratives were analyzed to gain core themes that relate to the benefits of the program and recommendations for the future.

Selection of Participants

Students in their first year of the master’s program in counselling psychology at the University of British Columbia were originally recruited for participation. In September 1999, first year master’s students were made aware of the possibility of this research project at the students’ orientation to the counselling psychology program. Interested students were told to email myself and I would then contact them if the project was approved and went ahead. First year students who had heard about the possibility of the project from other students and faculty and who had expressed interest were also followed up with and contacted.
Once the project was approved, students were re-contacted and of the interested students who met the criteria of participation (first year master’s students), six students were able to meet in the same time frame for the project and attend the group sessions together. Upon the advice of the department advisory committee it was then determined that at least one student be included from outside the university counselling program to preserve all the participants’ anonymity. Flyers were posted at the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia and contacts made with the Adler Institute and Simon Fraser University counselling psychology programs. A participant was recruited who was available for the time frame of the study but unfortunately the timing of the group sessions then needed to be adjusted. As a result two students from the U.B.C. counselling program could no longer participate, and the final group contained five master’s students in counselling psychology (four females, one male; ranging in age from mid twenties to fifties).

Data Collection

The individual interviews with each participant were arranged in the three weeks following the final group session and were conducted in a research office in the counselling department at the University of British Columbia. As stressed by Stake (1994), qualitative researchers undertake “quests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict” (p. 244). As such, in the interviews I avoided the probing of sensitive issues as much as possible and respected how the participants’ chose to frame and structure responses (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). As well, although the participants had signed an informed consent prior to the
beginning of the life review group sessions, following the advice of Dr. Beth Havercamp of the Counselling Department’s Advisory Committee, at the beginning of the individual interview sessions I went over an additional consent form with the recognition of dual relationship issues, stressed with participants that their permission would be sought for any quotes used in final narratives and that they would have an opportunity to review those narrative once they were complete (a copy of the consent form is included in appendices).

The interviews were semi-structured with a series of general questions and some more specific questions related to objectives of the personal development through life review program; and at the same time, I endeavored to allow the participants' perspective on the life review group to unfold as spontaneously as possible (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The interview questions were as follows:

_General Questions:_

1. Describe your experience of the life review group and what stood out for you about the group experience?

2. Describe what you liked/disliked about the group experience?

3. What was it like to have your peers involved in the group?

4. Did you learn anything new about yourself as a result of the group experience?

5. Do you detect any differences in yourself as a result of the group experience?
6. What impact, if any, did the life review group have on your commitment to self-care practices?

7. Did the life review group have an effect on your experience of the counselling psychology program and your studies in general?

8. Do you have any suggestions for improving the life review group experience?

More specific questions related to the program objectives:

1. Are you more aware of your needs and motivations for helping others as a result of your experience in the life review group, and if so how?

2. Are you more aware of your personal strengths, challenges, and coping skills as a result of the life review group experience, and if so how?

3. Do you have any thoughts regarding your emotional health and how it might enhance or distract from your effectiveness as a counsellor? Any new awareness in this regard as result of the life review group experience?

4. Do you have a plan in place for maintaining your own emotional well-being? Did your group experience have any influence in this regard?

All the interviews conducted with the participants were audio-taped and then transcribed. Through the transcription process I re-familiarized myself with the interview content (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I then wrote descriptive narratives to capture the essence of each interview and reduce the original transcription data by approximately one third (Miles & Huberman). In the narratives I used as many of the participant’s own wording as possible and followed the original sequence of the interview. I then presented
the narratives to the participants in individual feedback sessions and asked them to check
the narrative to see if it was an accurate representation of the interview and their group
experience; add anything they wished to include and remove from the narrative anything
they did not want included in the final documentation. I encouraged them to make any
changes they desired. Four of these feedback sessions were conducted in the same
research office as the original research interview and one feedback session was conducted
off-campus at a different location to be convenient for the participant. During the
feedback session I either left the room or became engaged in other work to allow the
participants to review the narratives without distraction. Once the participants indicated
that they had completed their review of the narrative and made any changes, I elicited
their feedback on the study process and thanked them for their participation.

Data Analysis

Once the verification of the narratives was complete, I systematically analyzed all the
narratives to extract common experiences utilizing Miles & Huberman's (1994)
recommendations for sequential qualitative analysis. Although these researchers admit
that "the human mind finds patterns so quickly and easily that it needs no how-to advice"
p. 246), they recommend steps that can aid in finding themes and stress the importance of
being "able to see added evidence of the same pattern and remain open to disconfirming
evidence when it appears" (p.246). For this analysis I underlined key words in the
narrative texts and restated key phrases, remaining as literal as possible but also using
paraphrases. I then reduced the key phrases and paraphrases to create clusters, the cluster
names becoming in effect pattern codes. Pattern coding is a way of grouping and
attaching meaningful labels to data that "identify an emergent theme, configuration or explanation" (p.69). I then looked for common themes across the narrative texts as well as the discrepancies or contradictions that occurred.

From a narrative theoretical stance it is not the "truth" but the "trustworthiness" of interpretations that is at issue in data analysis. As stressed by Reissman (1993), "trustworthiness not truth is a key semantic difference: The latter assumes an objective reality, whereas the former moves the process into the social world" (p. 64). As part of the process of validation, I took several steps to try to increase trustworthiness and confidence in my results. Firstly, for ethical reasons and as a way of seeking "correspondence" I allowed the participants to thoroughly review the descriptive narratives (Reissman, p.66). In addition, as recommended by Miles & Huberman (1994), I gave the narrative summaries to a colleague from the community, experienced in qualitative analysis. My colleague independently extracted themes and compared them across the narratives so that I was then able to compare his analysis with my own for verification. Following Reissman's suggestion, I also endeavored in Chapter IV to seek "persuasiveness" and "coherence" in my work by showing that my analysis was reasonable and convincing and providing as "thick" an interpretation as possible for the thematic results (p.65). Finally, I have also attempted to impart sufficient information in this chapter to allow the reader to see how the findings from this study were produced and thus make visible what I did to derive the results presented in the next chapter.
Chapter IV

RESULTS

If you want love, you should come over. I’d like some time to be by your side.
You look like you could lean on a shoulder, and leave the walls behind.

~ 54-40; You should come over, CD: Since When

Introduction

What is love to the child? Acceptance. Validation. Encouragement. Safety. In this chapter I present the results of the data collection and analysis in this study. The narrative summaries of the interviews are each included in their entirety. The summaries were written using quotes from the participants and as many of their own words as possible in the body of the texts. I then offer the themes that emerged from analysis of those narratives related to the benefits the participants attributed to the life review program and suggestions for how the life review group experience could be improved. Firstly, however, I will endeavor to briefly describe my own context related to the study to help ensure the trustworthiness and integrity of the results of this work.

Researcher’s context

Because my presence is intricately woven into this study, it is important for me to elucidate my experience of the topics in question. By doing so I am following the qualitative tradition and narrative framework that recognizes and openly acknowledges the impact of researcher’s background, beliefs and values at various levels in the study process. The reader can then understand more fully the context in which the data was gathered and analyzed.
I became committed to the value of personal development in counsellor training through my own experience in the Master’s program at the University of British Columbia. I entered the program in 1997 with a full-blown case of the “imposter complex”. I had been admitted to the Master’s program after my second application was accepted and although I was determined to be a therapist, I was scared. I had succeeded in my goal in getting into the program and now I was plagued by self-doubt. What was I thinking? Surely the tap on the shoulder was inevitable: “Excuse me, Ms. McLean, we are going to have to ask you to leave. You clearly are not suitable for this program.” I remember absolutely dreading the “introductions” that inevitably began every course in the program. Going round the circle... almost my turn. God help me. Anxiety finally tripped me and I fell quite spectacularly during a presentation in one of my courses in my first term. Dr. Rod McCormick sat with me afterwards and simply asked me what I wanted to do about shyness. I had been to a counsellor before and I decided it was time to go back again. I started counselling at the U.B.C. Counselling Services and have continued with supervision and therapy since.

Opportunities for personal development became available to me during my program and I received a lot of support and guidance. I was able to get a research assistantship in my first year working with Dr. Richard Young on the family career development project. The team meetings that were held weekly with the other students became a source of camaraderie for me and helped me to feel connected to the department and the program. I also came to know Ray DeVries through this research work. A year ahead of me in the program he became a good friend and confidant. It was through Ray’s
enthusiasm and example that I first became interested in Therapeutic Enactment and was encouraged to take the group course with Dr. Marv Westwood, which I consider to be a major branching point in my career. Through my subsequent work with Dr. Westwood I had the opportunity to attend therapeutic enactment workshops, group leadership experiences and supervision. I realized that I was indeed fortunate to have these experiences that are not readily available to students generally in the Master’s program.

It was also as a result of my work with Dr. Westwood as part of the Transition Program for Canadian Peacekeepers in the spring of 1999 that I received training in the life review method by experiencing my own life review at the Conference on Creative Aging at Green College. This experience opened for me new awareness of my life story, my strengths and challenges. I found that in writing on the themes it would take me some time to formulate what I wanted to share with the group, emotion was released, and I cried a lot just in the writing, self-reflection part of the process. In speaking my story in the small group and hearing other people’s stories, I found I gained new awareness and insights. Even when I thought about an aspect of my story and believed this was not a particularly emotional piece for me, I was surprised in speaking the story in the group how much emotion was stirred in me. Self-consciousness in a group continues to be a challenge for me and this was evident in the life review group as well. However, the small group experience also seemed to be somewhat similar to what I had witnessed working in a previous research project with Harly Neumann facilitating career counselling sessions with First Nations Youth, family and community members. I felt very much
affirmed and supported by the facilitators and other group members in the life review process.

Realizing how much I benefited from the opportunities I had, I became interested in finding a way to bring personal development into counsellor training for other students. It occurred to me following my experience with life review that the group-based life review method could offer a safe means for Master's students' personal development as well as providing the supportive peer group experience helpful in easing the transition to graduate work. Through my course work in program development and evaluation I was able to formulate these ideas into a program and research proposal for my Master's thesis. Although I had originally considered also including other approaches along with the life review, such as therapeutic enactment, with Dr. Patricia Wilensky's suggestion I decided to keep the focus on the life review method. From my own experience and from feedback I have heard from helping with life review programs for veterans, I believe that life review has the potential to provide an accepting, validating, encouraging and relatively safe introductory framework for beginning self-exploration.
Narrative for Participant One: “Sam”

Sam experienced the life review group as very comfortable. She liked the “smallness” of the group and in the group she felt very much attended to. Sam thought that the attentiveness had a lot to do with the fact that her fellow participants were also master’s students in counselling psychology and, therefore, very skilled in listening and giving feedback. Sam also appreciated the facilitator’s skills in giving feedback and how the facilitator participated in the group: “You felt like she was part of the group and she gave very clear feedback. Her feedback was quite beautiful”. Sam thought this contributed to her overall very positive experience in the group.

One of the things that stood out for Sam about her group experience was what she described as the intelligence of the group shown through the creativity and quality of the stories they read to each other. Sam says that in the past this might have intimidated her, that she might have put herself down comparing herself with the others in the group; however, in this particular group those feelings did not arise for her:

I have a history of doing that in my life. Comparing and saying I am not as smart as, not as this and not as that. So it was a perfect place for that to rise up. But in fact it didn’t. I think I have more of a handle on it to begin with but it actually didn’t because there was just an honoring from my perspective of these people.

Sam relates that for her instead of making comparisons with the other people in the group, the group became a living experience of appreciating people’s differences and honoring
those differences. She notes that we often talk about honoring differences but that being in the group brought that alive for her.

In addition to comparing herself to others, what Sam feels is another “old piece of me” was the self-consciousness she often felt when she cried in the group. Although there was nothing that she disliked about the group experience, she disliked that she cried: “I dislike when I cry. But on the other side of that I know that that’s just real, so it’s necessary if it’s necessary.” She said that it was hard to be “the one that does the crying” in the group.

As far as having her peers as part of the group, Sam felt in the beginning it was nice because “it wasn’t all strangers”. Sam also feels that she will want to hang out with her fellow group members more in class now that they have shared this experience. She says that she will be inclined to gravitate to them as people “I really know. Because we shared that and it’s a very intimate process.”

A new awareness that came out of the group for Sam involves her ability as a writer. Feedback from the other group members revealed to Sam that she has a unique and creative way of writing her stories. This new awareness came as a surprise to Sam and she feels it is a gift she received from her group experience that she can now reflect on:

I had no idea. Sort of like a creative aspect of myself is now looking at me and I am looking at it and going maybe I can do that a little bit if I want to.
So that is really exciting because I am very much at a point in my life where the whole idea of becoming more creative really calls to me.

Sam also learned that she was not afraid to take risks from her experience in the group. She feels the group process taught her and gave her the courage to take those risks. For example, Sam had some unfinished business from one group session and she brought that into the group. She learned that she “wasn’t afraid to spout out something that felt very important to me”, and have clarity around that. “I wasn’t all muddled about it, I was able to really clarify it for myself and put it out.” In the past she believes that she wouldn’t have been clear about the problem and that her old pattern would have been to “not rock the boat” and therefore remain silent about something that was bothering her.

Taking risks in the group carried over to taking risks in her personal life as well. Sam relates this courage to do and say what she needs to as part of the process that she has been on of becoming “more myself”. Sam feels the group has definitely “cheer-led” this process. The group actually came about at a time when Sam was in the midst of a personal transition and helped her have the courage to look at doing something in an unorthodox way. “The group and what happened there has supported me in individuating and saying to myself, hey this might not fit those people over there but it feels good to me so I can do it, I am going to take the risk.” She feels the group has given her more confidence and support in this process.
Sam also became more aware of getting past first impressions as a result of her group experience. She says that she tends to “pigeon hole people” when she meets them and realizes that she has done this after she has known the person more intimately. She realizes that most people probably do this automatically but it has been something that she is trying to move past. It is an example of something that she was aware of but the group highlighted it to her in a concrete way:

Its another example of yes, I am still doing that and I am asking myself to be more careful around my first impressions of people…these are things that I want to do and things that I believe in but then to have the experience of it, to taste it in such an intimate little place and in such a quick time period because sometimes you have to know someone for years before you get close to them.

For Sam the group experience was not just about new learning, the experience helped exemplify and support aspects of herself that she already knew and was in a process of developing.

Also as a result of the group experience, Sam feels that she is generally more in touch with herself and that she will therefore have a little more to offer in her program. "I will take things in a little differently just because I feel more stretched. Everything that stretches me a little bit makes it easier to do the flow". Sam feels that the group was a part of a process of reducing her fear and not “have fear interrupt what I really wanted to do and how I really wanted to be”, whether that’s part of being in the Master’s program or other aspects of her life:
S: I feel very much that I want to drop the constraints and I suspect that I will be living a bit of an unusual life style but it is possible that what’s going to fit for me is not quite the norm, if there’s such a thing. Somehow that’s okay, I can go do that, I can do what I need to do.

I: And that came as a result of the group, specifically?

S: The group very much added to that. I think what the group did is it helped me move from thinking and the maybe into the stepping. There is something experiential about what the group gave me. Something about actually doing.

The group also affirmed for Sam that one of her motivations for being a counsellor is to connect with other people: “The importance, a sustenance for me to connect with people and to not connect with everyday role people but with their hearts.” The group experience, and specifically a disclosure by one group member, again really highlighted this for Sam, “One of the group members told of an incident in her life that was very, very personal and it just made my heart warm, it was her being vulnerable... I sort of spill out my vulnerability quite easily so when someone else shares I feel it is that opportunity to connect and meet.”

Additionally, Sam feels that the feedback from the group made her more aware of her strengths and challenges. The group’s input helped her reframe what she thought of as “missed opportunities” when she was younger, and the fact that she is in the Master’s program at this point in her life. “How that can all be reframed into yes, but you are doing
it now and the strength of doing things out of order. And the courage to still do that. That was given to me.” As far as challenges, Sam feels that she will continue to stretch herself, “and there is bit of a stronger call, a call to do all those things.” Sam feels that one particular challenge that she has been aware of and that she experienced in the group has to do with tears. Sam knows when things really touch her and she has difficulty at times with her own tears. She realizes that to have her own feelings and be touched by stories is appropriate but she does not want to get overwhelmed by her own feelings when counselling someone. “And that happened for me in the group as well where another person’s story touched me and the tears came. That’s one of my hardest things with people. Its not that I shouldn’t have a response but to stay with the person and not go, you know, that struggle.” Her experience in the group showed Sam that this is still a challenge for her but she is aware of it.

Sam asserts that she is stronger as a result of her group experience and potentially more creative. Sam sees being stronger as relating specifically to an increased confidence in her intuition and her sense of humor, both of which she feels will make her a better counsellor. Sam said that the group facilitator noted Sam’s ability to see the seriousness of something and the humorous side as well. Because the group facilitator named her playfulness for Sam, it “brought it up to the table and I went, yeah I do, do that. Then it became a strength, a usable thing.” Sam plans to continue to do some humorous writing as a way of coping and to keep her creativity alive.

And that’s what the group has given me, just go over to the computer and do just do nonsense, if you feel like it. You are entitled to play a little
The thing is as a counsellor perhaps we can be too involved in the seriousness of life and the seriousness of the consequences of things and maybe this is for me a bit of an emotional balance, to be able to use the humour.

Another new learning from Sam’s group experience involved group process. What Sam realized when she felt unsettled after one group session was that she had unfinished business that she needed to bring forward to the group. She found this very interesting and exciting to reflect on because she knew in theory about unfinished business and now she had experienced the feelings for herself. She related that it was a very powerful experience for her and she felt compelled to bring something to the group:

I really had to...I really felt that it would have been very unfinished business and I would have been carrying it and not been part of the group for the rest of the sessions. I really did feel that for me it was very important. The power of that was very big.

Also notable about this particular experience for Sam was that she felt it was the group and not the individuals that she was addressing her unfinished business to. “I was so aware that it was the group that I had to come forward with it, it wasn’t the individuals. You know that whole thing about group dynamics and the group is its own sort of thing, well I was so aware of that.” When the group did a theme that Sam felt some shyness around she felt that she did “a bit of a controlled thing on it” and didn’t share as much of herself as she could have. She then felt that she dishonored the group: “That was my
unfinished business. When I went away I thought, oh. And it wasn't that I dishonored the people, it was that I dishonored the group and that was big for me. I had to come back and talk about it." Sam had learned about group process and the group container in theory but this was her first experiencing of what she had learned about and Sam found that very interesting and valuable.

Sam concluded her feedback about the group by again highlighting that each person's style in the group was distinct and how that really stood out for her. She saw the group members as honestly giving of themselves, sharing deeply and that she appreciated the "incredible ways that we are different and the honoring of those differences."
Narrative for Participant Two: “Lynne”

Lynne exemplified what stood out for her about the life review by showing me her new tattoo. She explained that she had wanted to get a tattoo previously but had not done so because she wanted it to be something very meaningful for her. However, from the first life review session exercise Lynne identified a symbol for her ideal self that really resonated with her. Then for the final session involving goals and aspirations she did a drawing of that symbol and made the decision to get it done into a tattoo:

I don’t want to give the impression that I just decided to do this, it had been coming for a while... but as the group progressed there was that idea of becoming more of an ideal self and having the group give me some feedback on specific things really reinforced that. And I thought this is really neat. So it all kind of came together and now I have a physical reminder of the life review process.

Lynne stressed that because she had just had the tattoo done a few days before the feedback interview, “that’s what stands out for me, there are lots of other things but it’s just because it’s recent it stands out for me”.

Although Lynne had some reservations about being a group member, stemming from past group experiences, she decided to volunteer for the life review experience. She wanted to help out a fellow student with research (“I know how hard it is to get participants and stuff”) and learn more about the life review process. Being interested in
working with older adults and having been introduced to the life review process in her
group class motivated Lynne to volunteer for the group.

Lynne realized that she was challenging herself by joining the life review group
because she says “groups aren’t usually my thing”. Lynne likes to lead groups but she
typically does not like to be part of a group. She decided, however, that this would be a
good experience for her and she was surprised at how comfortable she was in the life
review group:

So I thought, well this is good and I will make myself do it and see how it
is. And I was quite surprised at how quickly the group seemed to
jell...And people seemed quite comfortable talking about personal things.
And I have a hard time trusting people so I thought I am not going to able
to get into this and I found myself getting into it and being quite
comfortable. There was some hesitancy talking about things but everyone
else was so giving and I thought I’m going to try and it may not be totally
comfortable for me but I am going to try and see what happens.

Lynne felt the group was a very positive experience for her because she had to take a
chance and trust the other group members and her risk was rewarding. She found the
group very supportive, was impressed by how deeply others shared and she had no regrets
about her participation: “I never found myself coming out (of a group session) saying,
‘Why did I tell them that. Oh I should never have said that’. Which is the first time in a
group that I haven’t come out saying, ‘Why did I do that?’...It was my most positive
group experience.”
Lynne highlighted that she liked the use of humor in the group and how supportive the group was. She thought that most of the life review themes were quite heavy but that people also used humor appropriately so it was “really fun at times”. Lynne stressed that the humor used was appropriate: “There wasn’t someone making jokes because they were uncomfortable. It just really seemed comfortable. That stands out for me. Everyone seemed quite comfortable and supportive.”

Lynne was actually surprised by how comfortable the group was and the stories that were told. Lynne relates that people shared deeply in the group and right away “we got into stuff”. In her experience groups can be awkward just getting started but that this group seemed to work well right from the beginning. She thought the comfort and supportiveness of the group may have been because the group members were counselling students, and she attributed her positive experience to the facilitator as well: “she was really good, really supportive.” Hearing people’s stories was amazing for Lynne because she feels that we think we know other people but hearing their stories can give us a new perspective: “because we tend to make judgments about people, like, ‘I know this person, I know what they are about’. And you find these things out about people, amazing courage and stuff and that you would never know”.

The disclosures of other group members had a particular impact for Lynne and she felt that the way the group managed those disclosures exemplified how the group was supportive and respectful. She appreciated that during difficult disclosures no one tried to
rush in and rescue anyone else or smooth things over. For example with one group member:

We all showed her that we cared without pitying her. It really showed that the group was really in touch with her but they weren’t there to rescue her… They just felt for her and I think everyone said that was really courageous. I think everyone was really supportive but in a real positive empowering way… Next time no one ever babied her. It was, “Okay thank you for sharing. We are there for you”. I didn’t see that at the next session everyone treated her with kid gloves, it was great in that way.

Also impacting Lynne was how she experienced the facilitator’s role and participation in the group. Although Lynne stressed that it wasn’t something that she disliked about the experience, when asked, Lynne noted that the facilitator did not share personal things often. Lynne had found herself wanting to hear more disclosure from the facilitator in the group and at the same time she reflects that this may not have been appropriate:

She would say some personal things but it was ‘why don’t you do these things with us’, kind of thing. It wasn’t a dislike though. It was just a couple of times I was like, “I’d like to hear your story” because she comments on everyone’s but we don’t get a chance to maybe comment on her… Its not a dislike because I don’t know if it would be good for the counsellor to be right in there either.
Lynne was really curious about the facilitator’s story, and she sensed a bit of an imbalance between the facilitator and group members. Still, she wondered how much the facilitator could have revealed, “without becoming a total member of the group.” Lynne related that this is an issue that she has struggled with and she wonders how she will manage personal disclosure as a group leader.

Lynne was initially concerned about how comfortable she would be having her peers in the group. She didn’t know who was going to be in the group and she had experienced the atmosphere in the program as being quite competitive: “There is this sense of everyone’s being very nice about it but ‘what did you get’, kind of thing. And ‘I am more empathic than you are’. So I thought, ‘Oh god, how is this going to work?’” Lynne feels that there is also an expectation that everyone in the Master’s program is totally well-adjusted and she worried about revealing herself in a group with her peers: “There is this sense that we are all supposed to have our shit together and so how can I go in there and show them this happened or I did this.” When Lynne discovered who was actually going to be in the group her anxiety abated because she knew a couple of them. She admits that if certain of her peers had been part of the group she would have felt more inhibited. The life review group members were peers that she felt at ease with so it worked out for her even though initially being with her peers was a concern.

Lynne also feels that she benefited from the realization that all the life review group members had “crap in their past”, that most of them had been in counselling at one point or another and had really benefited from it. She feels that may be partly why certain
people are in the program because counselling is something that they believe in, having had a personal experience of it.

Although not sure if she learned anything new about herself as a result of her experience with the life review group, Lynne feels that some of her challenges were highlighted for her. For example, she feels she has difficulty with trusting people and tends to guard herself. She knew this about herself but felt it was highlighted in the group for her when she became aware that she was very vague about circumstances in her stories. She says that the group members all called this being “surfacy”: “People would say I just did a surface thing today”. Lynne noticed that she would gloss things over so that when she read her stories she realized that you wouldn’t be able to tell what happened: “You know, it’s vague and confusing and I’ve brought something and I have alluded to something but I am not being really honest with what’s going on.” Lynne says that an interesting dynamic developed whereby she wasn’t completely comfortable disclosing but she was also uncomfortable continuing to hold back, so in the end she started to risk revealing more:

When I did do that (something surfacy) I felt somehow not only that I had cheated the group of something but that I had maybe cheated myself of something. So as the group went on I noticed taking more chances in the sense of disclosing more personal stuff and just seeing what would happen with that as opposed to keeping more of a distance. That was something that I learned about myself but it also spurned me to get past that to some
extent or to at least play with that a little bit because it was a safer
environment and its like, 'try it and see what happens'.
Lynne feels that the life review group highlighted this issue for her as well as giving her
an opportunity to experiment with risking more.

Like her challenges, the life review group also reinforced Lynne’s strengths. For
example, Lynne rediscovered her creativity in the life review process. The other group
members complimented her on her writing ability and she reflected that she used to be
involved in creative writing more. Lynne feels that the life review brought several things
into focus for her. Things that she was aware of about herself and had forgotten such as
her writing ability, or things that she knew such as her difficulty with trust that she hadn’t
really looked at.

In addition, Lynne felt she got a lot of insight from the final theme on values and
aspirations. She says that she shared the questions with her stepfather and it stimulated a
good discussion for them. Lynne’s thoughts and feelings around this particular theme
have really stayed with her: “Before we did it and after I have really been thinking, ‘yeah,
what are my values’ and am I living according to what I believe in. That has really been
on my mind a lot”.

Lynne is also curious to see if her experience of groups and her trust level will be
different as a result of her life review group experience. She went into the life review
group with her usual apprehension, was able to risk more involvement and had a positive
experience. She has not been in a group since the life review, but she hopes there will have been a shift so that she is more willing to trust in her next group experience and share more of herself with people.

As well, Lynne feels that participating in the life review group was valuable for her development as a counsellor and her experience in the Master’s program in general because she was able to really experience being a group member. She mentioned that in the group class she acted as a client but it was more for practice and the fact that she was being graded did not make the experience authentic for her. She thinks that doing the life review has made her a more effective group leader because she now knows what it is like to be a group member and she is now more aware of the leader and his or her role in the group process. As she mentioned previously, she is particularly aware of the leader’s participation or not participation in the group as far as personal disclosure is concerned and the effect that has for the group members: “That’s something that I wouldn’t have been more aware of if I hadn’t done this.” She feels that opportunities to experience being a group member or individual client should be built into the Master’s program:

Because I think a lot of counselling programs have you be a client, you have to have counselling before you go in or whatever and I think that’s good. It’s very different to read about the experience of being a client but it is totally different if you are the client and you are there for a reason.

She thinks that the life review group will effect how she reads journal articles and studies because she has experienced being in a group for herself and she believes this makes her more informed about what she is learning.
Lynne hopes that her creative approach to writing, like her increased risk taking, remains following her life review group experience. Perhaps not as a result of the life review group, but more what Lynne feels she allowed to be fully expressed during the life review, was her creative writing. She says that she has been doing more creative kinds of essays and narratives since the group but she recently received a disappointing grade on an essay she submitted in a class. Lynne hopes her creativity won’t be “stamped out” by her need to maintain good marks in the Master’s program.

As far as taking care of her emotional well being, Lynne feels that she is pretty much on top of what’s going on for her emotionally and she does not feel that the life review group impacted her in that regard: “I have been pretty good about taking care of my emotional health, probably spend too much time making sure I am okay...I didn’t see the group changing a lot about that because that has been something I do.” She feels she already had her self-care in place because of problems she experienced in the past.

Overall Lynne believes the success of her group experience lay in the personalities of the group members and their dedication to the process: “Everyone wanted to be there. Everyone was really committed to it.” She suggests that screening people regarding how motivated they are for the group experience, stressing what is involved as far as time commitment like what was done with this life review group and anything else that could be done to get motivated, committed participants would be beneficial.
Lynne believes she is more aware of her motivations for being a counsellor as a result of the life review group. She relates that before the life review group she had taken a course and become interested in conscious purpose ("why are you here, why are you doing this, what do you want to do here"). She says that the life review then came at a good time because she was already starting to think in those terms. During the life review the session involving values and spirituality she started thinking a lot about her own values and spirituality and how they might impact on her work with clients. She especially became aware of this in relation to the strong beliefs expressed by another group member:

I saw that and I thought, part of me was jealous because I don’t have that kind of belief in something bigger than myself, but it also really made me see how that would impact how she counseled and I thought about how is my maybe non-belief going to impact how I counsel and how am I going to deal with clients who do have a strong belief. Am I going to be the best counsellor for them, how am I going to navigate that?

Lynne felt that although she may have thought about the impact of her values on clients before being in the group, witnessing other group members express their values “really brought it forward”: “Seeing the people in the group and their values and you could really see that operate even in the group. Some you agree with and some its like ‘Why do you think that?’ But at least being aware of certain clients or certain areas now that I need to maybe bow out or look at that. It has really brought that to my attention.”
Lynne noticed that another challenge for her involves being able to sit with positive feedback that she is given. In the life review group she noticed that when other group members were reflecting on her stories and pointing out her strengths, that she became very uncomfortable: "I’ve learned to deflect a lot. So I know that’s a challenge, being able to sit when people say nice things. And people being supportive. That always makes me really uncomfortable.” Lynne also noticed that other group members often reacted in the same way to the positive comments and that she was not the only one reacting that way.

Lynne says that in the past she would cope by doing things for herself but that the life review experience has opened her up to sharing things that were troubling her with others. For example during one session she disclosed something sensitive from her past and was surprised by her own reaction and the group’s: “So I wrote it and then I thought, ‘Why am I bringing this up?’ And I thought, ‘This is the past. This is stupid. This is going to be really unpleasant.’ And I went ahead and did it and talked about it and everyone was so supportive.” She feels now that maybe there are things that we “keep inside because we are so afraid that if we told people it would be catastrophic”, and she now has the experience of sharing something with the group and it being okay:

It was kind of like, “Oh that must have been difficult for you, okay. That’s fine.” I felt like I was able to let that go almost. Because I have been carrying this around and to have these people that I know but not know say, “Okay that happened. That sucks. It doesn’t change anything.”...That was very freeing for me.
She thinks that because of this experience she will know when something comes up again that she can share it with others and will be more willing to do so.

Lynne does hope that she and the other group members will get together again. She feels that they really bonded. She says that her sense is that if there had been ten more sessions of the group or even that the group could become a "regular thing" and group members would all have wanted it to continue.

Lastly, as a final comment on what stood out about the life review group experience, Lynne said she was constantly amazed by the stories in people's lives and how those stories affected her. She thinks that people have the most amazing lives and amazing stories and that our society is not geared to getting those stories out. In the group she learned from other group members what they had been through and how they have dealt with things. Her perceptions of people changed as a result of the life review experience: "Makes you really appreciate everyone's process and everyone's journey".
Narrative for Participant Three: “Shawna”

Shawna had never really been a group member before so it was the group experience that stood out for her about the life review. She took the group course but she appreciated the chance to really experience being part of a group. Shawna found that she didn’t feel connected to any one individual or individuals in the group but connected to the group itself. She wanted, for example, to make a contribution to the group: “Like if I was lazy and think that I don’t want to write my thing this week I didn’t think S. is going to be upset or D. is going to be upset, it was more like it wouldn’t be fair to the group. So it was really interesting, the whole dynamic there.”

While Shawna was in the group she felt very comfortable and she shared things in the group that she had never shared other than one on one. She did feel nervous about sharing, not because she felt that she would be judged or that the group would not respond well, but because she had never had the experience of sharing in a group before. Shawna also felt most of her nervousness when sharing her stories came from a concern that she would start to cry and not stop. So she tried to keep her emotions in check while she was reading knowing that she is a person who cries easily when things affect her: “People told stories and I’d cry when I heard their stories and then I’d cry when I told my story.” She feels it was good to get past her self-consciousness and say what she did and know that she can say things in a group.
The life review group occurred at a very busy time in Shawna’s life and she liked that it forced her to take time for herself each week, “to sit down and think about me for an hour and half”. In the midst of a life transition, Shawna feels that she would not have taken the time to write if had not been for the group nor would she have had the space for herself each week:

I am not a person that journals or anything like that so it was good because it actually forced me to do that. And I always felt good when it was done but I never would get myself to do that without knowing that there was a group of people expecting me to show up with something to say. So it was good in that way that I had that hour and half by myself to write and then it was good to go and just talk. Like talk about myself for seven minutes or whatever and know that all these people were totally listening and then to get all this feedback that was always positive feedback.

Shawna related that she always felt good after reading her stories in the group because they were always reframed. She learned about the different ways that people understood her experiences and this gave her new ways to look at things.

Having her peers in the life review group has left Shawna wondering if this will make things awkward in her classes later. She feels this awkwardness may come from knowing so much about each other, but not knowing each other outside of the group experience: “Its not like we are a social group that goes for coffee and stuff like that but we really know a lot about each other and we are very close.” Shawna thinks that when she is in class with her fellow group members and they say something she may be able to
relate where that comment came from because she knows so much about them yet they are not friends: “It’s a different relationship. It might be different when I am back (in classes again), we might eventually become friends but we didn’t go in as friends and we saw each other once a week only as a group and when we go back to classes it might be different.” She says however that she will be happy to see the group members again.

Although she may not have learned anything new about herself from her life review group experience, Shawna appreciated the reframing of past experiences and behavior. She says that the feedback she was given may have been things that she heard before but somehow it seemed more valid coming from the group members than other people who she feels haven’t known her as well:

Because a lot of times (other) people would say something about me but I would think ‘yeah, but you don’t really know me so you can’t say that’. But because they (the group members) heard my experiences, I think they pretty much know me. And even for the last day we went around and said what we appreciated about each other and that felt really good because I thought these are some people that really know me.

Shawna has a more positive way of looking at her life experiences and how she has coped in the past as a result of the life review group experience. From the group, she realizes that she has come a long way and reflects on that rather than how far she has to go. When an incident occurred soon after the group ended that brought back Shawna’s
past, she initially was concerned that she would lose what she gained from the group and return to her old perception. However, this didn’t happen:

When it came at me I thought, well my first thought was ‘oh no what if I go back to dealing with it the way I was dealing with it before’. Then I thought ‘no, I don’t have to do that. I can keep looking at it differently now’...It was easier for me to say ‘no no you are strong and you can get through this because look how far you have come and you are not going to look at it in any other way.’

So because of her life review group experience Shawna feels that it will be a lot easier to cope with things from her past that resurface and not revert to previous perceptions: “I am able to say oh thank god I went through that because now that I have to deal with this again its going to be a lot easier.”

Shawna cannot say whether the differences that she has detected in herself since her life review are a result of the group experience or other things that are going on her life. In the midst of a transition, Shawna feels that she is more positive, happy and excited but this may be due to what is happening in her life away from the life review experience.

Because of the life review group experience, Shawna feels that her experience of the counselling psychology program in general will be positively affected. Not having experienced being a group member previously, she now feels that she is better able to identify what is happening in a group process: “Knowing what it feels like to be a group that has meshed, I will know when a group is not meshing and I will know there is
something wrong with the dynamics”. She also thinks that the group was good experience for her in the sense that she allowed herself to be vulnerable in front of a group of people and she now knows what that feels like: “So it will be better when someone comes to me personally or when I am running a group I will know the risk people are taking and appreciate what it is like to be a member of a group.” Lastly, Shawna feels the life review group experience gave her peers that she can turn to as a kind of support network while she is in the program: “If I was stuck I know that those are people that I can trust and I wouldn’t hesitate if I thought that there was something school-related that I needed to talk to someone about then I would feel comfortable talking to anybody that was in the group.”

Although Shawna has known for a while that journaling is something that she would like to do and her group experience also confirmed this, her behavior in that regard has not changed: “I don’t know if there will come a time in my life when I have the time to sit down with a cup of coffee and write. I just think that it was rewarding but it is just one of those things like some people say that they know that they should workout but they don’t”. Although she enjoyed the writing while she was in the group and felt she benefited from it, she does not feel more inclined to journal since the group experience.

Shawna would have liked the group to have more sessions. She feels that she would have benefited from an ongoing group:

Just because it was the time out in the week to force me to do the writing and I got the opportunity to go and be heard and know that I was talking to people who were listening to me. And I got to go to listen to people’s
stories of their lives and learn from other people, what they were experiencing and how people got through.

She related the group experience to being like going to a great picture show every week because of the stories people told. Shawna felt that hearing what everyone struggled with gave her a sense of camaraderie and helped her to not feel alone in her struggle: “I didn’t feel so left out there, everyone is out there doing this...it’s not me against the world.”

In addition, Shawna received confirmation from the life review experience that she has entered a field that is suitably to her personality. She didn’t learn anything new about what motivated her to become a counsellor but she did get validation that she is doing the right thing: “Because it took me four years to get into the program. So I started to think there must be something wrong. I must not be meant to do this. It was good to realize that it is compatible with my personality and my style of being.”

From the group experience Shawna received a lot of feedback regarding her strengths but not her challenges. She feels that from the group experience she was able to be self-reflective regarding her challenges such as being open in front of a group of peers and coming back to the present from deep emotional spaces. However she didn’t receive any challenging feedback regarding how she interacted in the group:

People said how they experienced me but they only said positive things, so if people did experience negative things from me I never heard about them. So in as far as finding challenges, if somebody had said ‘what you just said effecting me like this’ then I would have known that was a challenge for
me to stop being that way but nobody ever said that. I didn’t end up with a challenge to change my behavior because everyone was very accepting of my behavior.

What was new for Shawna from the group experience was an image she has of herself and how she copes with challenges. During the “metaphors for the self” exercise in the first group session Shawna picked a goat for her social self and as the group progressed she noticed that this image really fit for her:

There I was in a social group and it was really obvious even in my writing there was a real click to it. This thing, this thing, this thing...here are the facts and here we go...I never noticed before how much I was like that...I think the reality is that I have a very moving on, keep climbing, keep going kind of aspect to me which is good, because that is how I cope. Just keep going and move ahead, instead of sitting and pondering and worrying about it, I just leave it behind...And realizing that I am like that is something that I like because I thought that I was a person that does stay with things.

Shawna liked that she discovered that she was able to rise above challenging experiences and keep going, like the image of the goat, and not dwell on things. She would not have perceived herself this way, and it was from the group’s feedback that she gained this awareness and noted its reflection in her direct writing style.

Shawna realized from the group experience that although she cries very easily, she is comfortable with this. She had always realized that she cries not just when she is sad or
upset but anytime she is touched such as when she finds something really beautiful. In the past she saw this as a bad thing because she worried that other people may think she is weak or misperceive the crying as “losing it” or feel uncomfortable and that they have to make her stop crying. So when she cried while reading her stories in the group, she found it difficult at times and worried about the group’s reaction. However, she received feedback that the group experienced her being touched and crying as a good thing and part of “just a different way of being.” The other group members were not uncomfortable with it, did not see it as a weakness, nor did they feel that they had to help her stop: “It was good to hear that they didn’t experience it like that, they didn’t feel that they had to help me. That it was just me.”

Before Shawna spoke in the group for the first time about some challenging events in her life she worried about the group members’ reactions and the fact that she would then be seeing them later in a classroom setting where they might react to her differently because of what they would know about her. She realized that this was a risk in revealing her past that she wanted to take: “There was a choice that I didn’t have to do it. I could have talked about anything, right. But I thought that that was what I had to talk about. To be honest. I had to be honest with the group.” Shawna felt that other group members would also have equally hard stories to tell and she didn’t want to tell the “easy story” and then regret it. She witnessed this happen to another group member who then spoke about these feelings of regret in the group: “So then I was glad because it was confirmed for me that if I had told the easy story then I would have felt the same way.”
Shawna did feel responsible to the group to tell her story honestly, however she stressed that she did not feel coerced. Shawna saw it as a personal challenge that she wanted to overcome. She faced the challenge of firstly writing out the events and then secondly reading her story to a group of her peers. She felt that sharing this story in the life review group would be more difficult than with a group where she knew all the members had a similar experience. She decided that she wanted to push through the barrier of worrying about what the other group members would think and show herself that she could tell this story in a group. What helped her do this was thinking about her future clients: “And I thought ‘well if I can’t share of myself then how can I expect people to come to me and share’, just to help me get through that”. Shawna felt glad that she met the challenge of telling her story in the group and she feels that she has a better understanding of what her clients go through.

Lastly, Shawna feels that she has a better understanding of the narrative perspective from the life review group experience. She feels that she had the opportunity to re-author her own experience. Writing the story and having it framed positively in the group gave her a new understanding of where she is at with her experiences: “So I left there (the group sessions) each time feeling yeah this is the way it is. This positive way. This good way.”
Narrative for Participant Four: “Mark”

Mark had a very good experience in the life review group. He felt that the facilitator was a very effective and caring leader so that safety and trust were built in the group from the very beginning. He also said that it helped that he knew everyone and had a chance to chat with the facilitator before the first session. Although he admits that he doesn’t have any trouble with groups anyway, he thought this group was especially comfortable for him from the first session. The group experience also came at a very good time for Mark because he had been doing a number of things in the past semester of the counselling program for his own development and the life review provided what he saw as a wonderful chance to reflect and build on things he had been exploring.

Mark felt that everything about the life review process stood out for him: “There was something in every theme that stood out for me. You know, the mechanism of writing it, then reading it and getting feedback is an absolutely amazing experience.” He found that he mostly wrote free association and did not use the sensitizing questions too much to write his stories. He also found that it was not a problem to find something to write about and that his narratives flowed naturally. Mark discovered “cords running through” his stories when he wrote them and this was validated by the feedback he received in the group: “It may be career, it may family, loves and hates, but there was core stuff that repeated every week. What was neat was that was stuff that came out in the feedback too. I kind of got a sense of that myself writing it, but the feedback coming back every week supported that.” He felt that his stories were honored and validated in the
group and he came out of the group sessions feeling great about where he was at and what he was doing in his life. Mark enjoyed the life review group experience so much that he didn’t want it to end: “It was such a good feeling and the container in the room so sacred that it was like a real treat to be there.”

The hardest part of the life review experience for Mark was accepting the positive feedback that he received. He says that at first he would just sit there and say to himself, “okay thanks”, and not really absorb it. By the end of the experience, however, even if it was not necessarily easier to hear the positive comments, Mark at least started to believe they were genuine because they were coming from people who had gotten to know him. He believed what the group members said and was validated by the facilitator as well: “(the facilitator) was another one of these people that was continually illustrating themes and pointing out things that she appreciated. It was not hard to come out of the room feeling that much higher off the floor. It was wonderful.”

In particular, Mark liked how the set up of the life review group was very gentle in that he had the choice of sharing what he wished and he did not feel judged. He felt there was a real respect for what was shared in the group:

I know there were a couple of times when people said ‘I didn’t go very deep this week’. But as we started to discuss and give people feedback you realized that there was a lot of stuff that came out there. So it was very gentle that way. You didn’t feel that every week you had to drop a bomb or get right into something that you had never known about before.
yourself. But because of that freedom, I think, stuff came out that surprised everybody. I know I was surprised at times about what I had shared and what came back in terms of feedback and I seem to recall everybody saying that 'wow I didn't think that what I shared would have that effect.'

Mark also thought the themes were very good and he liked the structure of the life review. He liked the fact that every theme had the potential to bring up emotions: “So it wasn’t like you were starting soft and working up to the big ones. We did career second after branching points and career can be chalked full of lots of stuff that can be quite dramatic and intense and family came right after that.” Additionally, Mark felt that in the group there was a lot of shared thinking because everyone was a graduate student in counselling psychology and that this helped make the group a positive experience: “It felt like we were all in the same place and there was a sense that we knew what each other was talking about.”

Although Mark couldn’t think of anything that he disliked about the group, he would have liked the group sessions to be longer: “…sometimes we were into really great stuff and because of time and because there were other people left to go, we had to draw conversations to a close that were marvelous, that could have gone on for another forty-five minutes.” He feels that the group members were respectful of the fact that there was limited time and the facilitator was careful to make sure that everyone had enough time and had their say. Mark thinks another half hour of group time would have been nice: “I
like to ask questions and I like to hear people explain things...there were times when I would have liked to have continued with some of the stuff that people were saying to me.”

Going into the group, Mark wondered about having his peers as fellow group members because he felt that the life review group was going to be a really intense experience with a lot of sharing of material that he hadn’t shared before. However, Mark also felt that he had been quite candid in courses when given the opportunity even before entering the counselling psychology program and he didn’t mind the sharing and disclosure. He found it validating being in a group of peers and realizing that there was a range of ages represented in the group, people older and younger than himself: “there was a range of experience and view points and like minds because we are all in this program for a reason so it felt really good and a privilege to have the feedback come from people who are in this program and I respect.” It also helped Mark feel comfortable being in the group with his peers knowing that he knew most of the group members previously from classes in the counselling program:

I didn’t feel self-conscious about what I was sharing or that, hmm, here is another helping professional listening to this and what are they going to say when they hear that this is my thought and this is what I did then. It actually was the other way, it felt really good to share this kind of stuff from my life with people who are also doing, and have been doing a lot of personal development and professional development and taking these courses and looking at counselling.
Mark’s experience in the counselling program in general has been positive, with a lot of really intimate sharing in class and outside of class. The life review group was a continuation of that experience and a chance to get to know a few of his peers better. He felt honored to be hearing and sharing their stories: “You can’t help but feel honored and privileged when someone is sharing something that they are sharing for the first time and you know that it is because they feel comfortable in the group and they don’t have a problem with you hearing this part of their life. That was a real nice benefit of being in this group.” Mark also felt that a real bond formed in the group as a result of the sharing and he feels close to all the members of the group: “I certainly would count all these people in all cases as someone who if I needed to talk to someone I could go to each one of these people and do that.”

As well, Mark realized there were similar themes and trials and tribulations in all the lives of the group members. This helped to legitimize what he was feeling and thinking, and helped him to re-author his own stories and appreciate how he has coped with challenges:

A lot of the time you feel that you are an island and no one else feels this way or has this problem and in the course of the life review you are hearing four other people share their stories and you realize ‘wow, there are a lot of similarities here’. And that helps shed light on my experience but it also helps me to say that I guess that I am doing as well, or better then I thought I was doing.
A significant new awareness for Mark that came as a result of the life review experience was related to his leadership ability. Mark received a lot of flattering feedback from the group members regarding his presence in the group: “The little things that I have just always done long before I decided to come into this program. But people were actually complimenting me and pointing them out which then made me think, you know, about that as something that I can be proud about or a strength that I might have downplayed as ‘everyone does that’.” The feedback he was receiving was from people he knew had group experience and they were recognizing his presence as significant and special thus it became more difficult for him to just dismiss the positive feedback: “Especially as I got to know all of them and felt that they were wonderfully capable and intelligent and soulful people and at the end of eight weeks they are giving me feedback and it’s harder to say ‘oh well, they don’t know’ or ‘they can say that but they don’t know all the stuff on the inside.’” By the end of the group experience he saw the genuineness of the comments coming from the group members and began to believe them.

Another new awareness came as a result of the fact that Mark was the only man in the group. One of the things that he has had a great deal of difficulty with as a man is knowing all the things that have been done by men especially abusively toward women: And there are times when I don’t feel particularly proud and happy about being a man. Even though I don’t and haven’t done those kinds of things. It’s just you are in a room and you start hearing stories about women being abused whether its sexually or otherwise and you hear about power and discrimination and stereotypes and sexism and I start sinking in my chair.
thinking I have seen a lot of that myself and it doesn’t make me feel good about being a man.

However the comments that came from the group members affirmed to Mark that he is a “good man” and that his kind of attitude and way of being was not only sensitive and caring and compassionate but it was also a nice way of being a man. He got reinforcement from the group for the kind of man that he is:

Some of the comments were that ‘I wish I had met a guy like you when I was going through this’ and you start thinking ‘oh its not just about the feminine side in me, its not just about these caring sensitive qualities that I have, they are also talking about the masculine strength, the male way of being that I have that I have been downplaying.’

He feels that this was a real gift, to realize that he had nothing to feel bad about or ashamed of in his masculinity:

To get to the end of the program and have them all say that you are fine as a man, these kinds of things are out there and you are not perpetuating that and you don’t have to feel shame and guilt because the way that you are a man is fine...to feel validated and appreciated for the man that I am, that was nice and a benefit.

In addition, Mark realized that he had a lot to offer the group in the way of his sense of humour. By the end of the group experience the comments from other group members were that Mark was funny in a spontaneous way and that he had an ability to make the other group members feel comfortable with his humour. Like the other positive
feedback he received, being able to relieve tension for other group members was something that Mark just assumed everyone could do and had not fully appreciated in himself. The feedback from the group members in this regard helped Mark feel special and appreciated in the group. He stressed again that the feedback was believable to him because the group members had a lot of credibility: "Its sincere by the time you come through the group and have shared all that. So when you get a comment that comes back that says something very nice it carries a lot more weight and substance."

Mark thinks that there may be a lessening of his discomfort with compliments given by others following the life review group. He relates that often outwardly he looks like he is accepting a compliment, but on the inside voices are in rebuttal. He says that it really helped the positive feedback sink in when he heard the positive comments over and over in the life review group every week: "And said genuinely with a lot of affection and with warmth and there is almost this mechanism that breaks through that screening device and puts it aside and accepts this at face value."

Mark relates that he has been in a process of accepting more and realizing more about himself since beginning the counselling psychology program and the life review has helped to consolidate things he has been cognizant of and working on. For example, he relates that during the last semester he came to the realization that he has been struggling with perfectionism. In the life review he saw the effect of this struggle in a concrete way in the various themes: "Regardless of whether it was career or body image I could see that battle between perfection and being really hard on myself and trying to be really good,
always trying to do the right thing and where that had taken me.” He feels that having previously isolated what he has been battling with, he was able to use the life review to go back into areas of his life and look at some of the effects of this struggle and be gentler with himself: “When I saw, here is an example when I was really hard on myself but there was also this, this and this, and that I was just trying to find balance.” The life review helped him be a little easier on himself and not so black and white. So the life review came at a time when he was having some realizations about himself from other work he had done and helped put perspective on things: “So it was a kind of interpreting some of this stuff and the life review was very timely in this.”

As far as suggestions for improving the life review experience, Mark could not think of anything. He did feel that the sensitizing questions were not necessary for him, that the description of the themes was enough: “I don’t know if that’s an improvement and I guess I am reaching because I can’t really think of anything. The experience was wonderful.”

One of the things that the life review experience highlighted for Mark was that self-care is a never ending process: “For example in the issue of family that was a good theme and I got a lot of stuff but it was just scratching the surface, there was a lot of stuff... So it gave me a sense that a lot of this stuff is stuff that I don’t think you can ever close the door on and I want to continue working with it.” He sees this exploration as a continual process.
During one of his courses with Scott Lawrence, Mark began to look at why he entered the field of counselling psychology and the life review was a validation of that in the sense that it allowed him to experience his philosophy of counselling in practice:

So its like 'wow now its in full operation'. We are actually doing this, its not talking about it, it's not just this heady class, not just here's my bumper sticker for the wall, 'I am here to help take chains off', I am actually sitting here in the process...in the course of sharing all of these themes and hearing all the rocky points you just realize that this is going to be a sense of what will happen when I practice, helping people.

What Mark also realized was how challenging counselling can be: “I think that probably the biggest thing that came out of the life review, there were times when very intense things were shared and to sit there and be there and be totally transparent and real and there for the person, you realize how much that takes out of you.” Mark related that there were times when the emotional intensity in the group was very high and he began to reflect on what he is going to do for himself when those situations arise in his professional practice:

There were a couple of times when it was very intense in this experience and afterwards getting out and driving home and realizing I was still carrying some of that inside...so it was a great way of saying 'yeah what am I going to do when I am doing this work constantly and I have a day where there are three of these things that hit me like a ton of bricks and now I have to go home'.
He became aware that there are things that he will have to have in place to take care of himself such as journaling, having a mentor in the profession to debrief with, exercise, yoga and meditation. He says that he has heard of the value of these things before but it was not until he actually drove away from a session feeling the sadness still inside and feeling shaken that he realized just how important it was going to be for him to practice self-care.

In addition, Mark relates that he valued the safety of the life review group for intense experiencing. He liked that the group was not a therapy group but that the intensity of sharing was apparent: “To the point that it’s a lovely way to, I wouldn’t call it an internship or something but you actually get to mix with that emotion and feeling and see what happens to yourself vibrationally and intellectually and it’s still safe.” Mark also felt that in the group he could experience when he had difficulty staying present with the intense feelings without the pressure of having a client in front of him that he is to be focusing on:

There is a leader there and you are a group member and you can say ‘wow I zoned out’. You are not there because you’re to focus on this person as a helping professional. But it takes you into that avenue, into that emotion and you have some very valuable experiences in about as safe a way as probably can be set up.

Mark believes that nothing new came from the life review experience as far as his thoughts on how his own emotional health may distract from his effectiveness as a
counsellor, but his experience in the group reinforced his will to be present for his clients. His sees this as a challenge for him when counselling others:

I realized that, yeah, there were a couple of examples of really gut wrenching stuff that was being shared and emotions were very, very high in the room. And you know, you are sitting there as a group member taking that in and when I stopped and thought about that I realized that wow I was way over here...I was really effected by what had been shared.

He feels that it is good that now he has an awareness of what can happen in sessions with clients and he has an appreciation for it: “I am going to stay hopefully effective but also real and not going to fool myself into thinking that I am a together person now, that I have everything figured out and I do not need to continue to do my work.” Mark has known about the importance of self-care for a long time, however the life review group helped reinforce this and “put theory into practice or at least to put awareness into practice” for him.

Mark learned a lot from witnessing the disclosures of his peers in the life review group. He relates that there were group members who revealed very significant events for the first time in the group and he appreciated the process around these disclosures:

So to watch a student and say wow here is somebody disclosing something for the first time that is incredibly intense and they have been carrying it for a long time, it’s a huge risk and very powerful. So charged emotionally. And then to watch their body even as they did it and received the feedback and realized they were okay and started to feel better about
what they just shared. You can read about that in books, how important
that is, but to see it. It was amazing.

Mark witnessed that relief expressed after the disclosures and the way some of these
disclosures came unexpectedly during the life review process: “All of a sudden as they
start to read its like wow, that came out of there and I didn’t see it coming… I have never
experienced that kind of thing before where it seemingly comes out of the blue.” He
realized that all of the themes in the life review could be emotionally laden and intense
emotions could arise in the group in any session.

Mark also shared his stories from the life review with significant others in his life
and from this he gained some significant new awareness. For example he shared one of
his stories with his mother and she gave him a different perspective on the story by
providing new information he hadn’t heard before:

She was able to provide a piece of information for me that I never knew
before… That’s how I have been telling the story and when she heard that
she said that’s not quite right… So for the first time in my life, it doesn’t
matter if that is the truth or not, I have an alternative explanation that
provides some sort of significant meaning for me.

He says that without the life review process he may not have learned this new piece and to
experience the relief it brought him: “Its remarkable to find, to experience what an
alternative explanation or new meaning does for releasing a lot of other stuff… to see it as
an incredible gift in terms of strength, that I can handle that and continue to move
forward." He feels that without reading his story to his mother he may never have had the conversation with her that lead to the “big missing piece” being revealed for him.

In conclusion, Mark feels that the life review experience should be included in the counselling psychology program. He feels that it is a gentle way to do some personal development work and that everyone could benefit from it: “It gives you the chance to go as deep as you want without being forced into a therapeutic group where you have to do that. Its really gentle and I think even the processes that happen in the group are just so valuable to experience...every grad should do it.”
Narrative for Participant Five: "Joan"

Joan considered her participation in the life review group to be an opportunity to experience the life review process and reflect on it as a process that she may be interested in using in her own work. This was probably the major piece for Joan. Joan considers herself to be a "group junkie" and she has had a lot of experience with different kinds of groups. She found it interesting to see how the life review group evolved without necessarily having the same dynamics as an open group where the struggle for safety is so apparent. She saw the safety issue as being present in the life review group but that the structure provided a safe container and there was not the "storming phase" in the life review group where confrontations typically occur in open group process. She feels the life review group provided an "introspective container" compared to the "relationship container" of the open group and therefore is more about how she relates to her life now and how she might see her life differently as opposed to how she relates to others.

Joan experienced the life review group as a very encouraging group with the negative aspects of one’s life being reframed and reflected back by other group members in a positive way, and "there was definitely a warm relationship built between people in a very positive, supportive framework." She liked the introspective aspect of the life review group and the difference to an open group that she sees as involving more confrontation and interaction amongst group members:

I like the process, I think it’s very good for an individual to experience, to reflect on their own life and get others’ perceptions of it... I just did a group
process this weekend and this group (the life review group) actually got to more self-disclosure through the structure, through the safety of the structure than existed in the other group. There was more interactive stuff in the open group which I am not sure which is better, it is a real different experience.

Joan sees the life review group as a very usable structure, one that could fit for almost any age. She saw that younger group members benefited from the life review so she does not see it as age restrictive: “So, yeah, I think it is an interesting structure and I think it would be usable with regular folks, I think it would be very usable.”

Joan also appreciated the biographical work and being able to place herself now, where she is now in her life, by reflecting back on some other stages, or times, or issues: “It was a way to kind of reflect on, ‘okay, where am I now and what am I doing and why am I doing it’. Doing an MA in counselling, it is a good way to look back and say ‘where am I trying to go with this now and how the hell did I get here.’” Joan relates that she has done a lot of biographical work but that the life review was helpful to go through. Thinking about her life, putting things down into a small, limited time and space, and then writing a narrative, she found to be an artistic process: “It was a story. I became more and more conscious that it was a story and trying to distill out of a lot of experience what I was able to share and what did I want to share.” She also saw it as an opportunity for her to share with the other group members from her own learning: “There became a teaching, sharing quality that came through for me that I wanted to give. It was like a gift and by
the end it felt like even more of a gift not only to me but to the group itself. The group itself started to build something that we could give to each other.”

There were two themes in the life review that Joan particularly struggled to get into two pages for the group, ones that she had to struggle to write compared to the other themes. She relates that the theme around sexuality and teens was one of her “mucky spots” and the last theme with the spirituality was difficult to distill into something small because “that was definitely something I wanted to share with the group as opposed to be introspective. I wanted to be able to say where I was.”

Joan liked the life review process as a novel way to address a question, struggle with it, write it and share it with a group. She also really enjoyed hearing people’s stories and understanding more about each person: “And to look at a person and say you look fine, you look great and then you start digging behind and its like whoa you went through that, my god. So there were issues that came up for people in the group where it was a real wow.” She feels that once you can make sense and meaning about where someone is coming from, the compassion comes as well. For that reason, she feels the life review process is especially relevant for beginning counsellors because of the depth of disclosure that occurs:

I think it was a very good vehicle for counsellors to be with others who are counsellors and experience their lack of perfect professionality, which is often very difficult to break through in group process. Counsellors are the worst. ‘I am so perfect, I never had a problem, I don’t have issues. That’s
why I’m a counsellor’. Its classic. So that created a safe vehicle for
counsellors to gently break through. As in all groups as one person was
able to disclose then the next could go and the next and that was very, very
evident. And I think people were very secure with that structure.

Joan could foresee the next step, if the group continued, to be to “take that crutch away”
and go into open group process: “Because there would be that self-disclosure there. And
you could feel the group dynamics. At times I was pissed off, you know, and it would
have been great to address that and take that second step. So as a vehicle, as a doorway
in, I think it is very good.”

Joan did not dislike anything about the life review group experience. If anything
she would have liked more sessions and to hit some other topics. In general it was a good
experience and it certainly did not bother her to be amongst peers: “I just saw them as
other human beings, not as colleagues, or peers in the sense of MA students or anything
like that.” She did notice the quality of writing and level of introspection all the group
members had which she sees as a reflection of the fact that they are all students in
counselling psychology. She is curious to see what “regular folks” bring to a life review
group.

Joan did take away something new about herself from the life review experience
and she came away from the group with a sense of increased strength and surety. She
relates that when she reflected back on her family “there was a pin drop there…struggling
with left over stuff there and sharing that.” She feels quite a new awareness evolved not
only of her parents and how they lived their lives but also how she is in her significant relationships: “So that has definitely brought me a new piece of how I can see what’s going on in their dynamics which is still there and how I can try and transform mine with my husband which I continue to try to do.” Joan also relates that there could have been more work that she could have done around one of the themes and was not able to:

So I didn’t get much out of that reframe because it was so tiny compared to how big that issue was for me. That was my biggest one. Because that was a very hard time in my life. That didn’t really come out in the group. So I guess that would be a downside of the structure because when someone could benefit from exploring something on a deeper level, that space isn’t there.

Not detecting any differences in herself in particular as a result of the life review group experience, Joan saw the experience as validating where she is at now in her life: “just another, yeah, you are doing fine, you are going the way you need to go.” The life review also gave Joan another way to work with a group: “It gave me another tool if I choose to use it.”

In terms of her own self-care, Joan did not see any new insights or reflections coming directly from the life review group experience. She relates that self-care has been part of her experience for some time:

I did a certificate program and the first thing the instructor said was if you don’t sleep when you need to, if you ever don’t eat when you need to,
you've got a problem. And I thought 'I never do any of those things when I need to'. For me it was whoa, basics. So that's been a long evolution for me.

As far as the question of whether or not the life review group experience had an effect on her experience of the masters program in general, the group experience affirmed for Joan that there is not one philosophy or way of doing things, "that there are many, many doors to the soul and spirit of another human being. So I guess the effect is to affirm an openness and a continued broadening."

Joan suggested that taking smaller bites off the themes for the life review might improve the group experience and leave more space for the group members to explore further. She says that it was very evident when a member of the group or herself needed to explore something further:

It was obvious in the group because it was really charged. For some it would be very light, no problem, this is easy. For another person it was whoa. So the question would be how to create a flexibility in the structure...a second sheet or a second questioning or an ability to say let's do this one again next week. Let's just repeat it and see what comes up if you take another angle or have another kick at the can.

In this respect Joan felt that the group could then contain the person who was struggling with that topic and they would all have an opportunity to go further. She also saw the possibility of breaking into group process, seeing if people were willing to stay with a
topic and explore it in an open way; however, she commented that this would mean leaving the group’s structure: “That would be a possibility too, to just come back and do more open process around it. It would really change the dynamic. There is a really safe structure there. Extremely safe structure.”

Joan felt that the main thing for her that came out of the life review group was a feeling of being encouraged about her life. She feels that this is not a bad goal for a group, to feel encouraged about your life, and from that point of view the life review group could not be improved. She felt that the group leader really modeled positive reflection: “She didn’t go into how is that effecting your life now and what’s going here and how are you stuck there and let’s really start psychopathologizing and picking apart.” Joan could foresee that with an aging population, the life review process would be a way to put a positive frame on life as well as aiding a grieving process. For herself, Joan felt a “digesting process” where grief and loss issues were opened up in the life review group that she then went away and reflected back on, considered where she was now and eventually moved on. Joan experienced the life review as a good vehicle for affirmation, re-scripting something into a positive frame. She notes that even if the reader did not do that, the group reflected a positive reframe of events and provided encouragement: “A lot of statements of I admire your courage, your strength, your ability to stick in there and try again.”

Joan did not leave the life review group any more aware of her motivations for entering the counselling field: “I struggled a long time before I went into the MA, its been
a good eight years, reading and having a sense of where I was going and what I wanted to be. So I don’t think that the group particularly affected that very much.” However, she does feel that she is more aware of her personal strengths as a result of the group experience. She came out the group experience believing that she was doing okay and feeling strong. Joan also relates that having a sense that she can write and expressing her artistic side came through in the group experience as well as her spiritual self. It was important to her to be able to express her spirituality and she was able to do that in the life review group:

The spirituality that I carry could exist there without being explicit and I could share it in a way that I felt was risky and I did it. I could have left it out and I decided no, I am just going to put it on the table. It is a big piece of me. So it was a place to share that when I normally don’t. Yeah, so that was quite a big piece for me. It was quite emotionally charged for me to actually share this is how I experience the world and spirituality and that whole piece was strong for me.

Being able to share her spirituality in the group revealed for Joan that she could be spiritual in the counselling field. She feels that had an impact because she would typically only gingerly put her spiritual side forward, wary of what the reaction might be.

The theme around sexuality helped Joan become aware of some challenges that she still faces in that area: “Because there are still some sticky spots and some grieving in there. I need to spend some time on that so I can be freer...So when I got into that topic,
realizing what was still there for me was helpful.” She feels that this theme showed her a
place that she needs to look at more.

The life review group also made clear for Joan that she needs to have compassion
for herself: “Have mercy upon myself when I blow things, and in my mind blow
something. Nobody, no matter how good they look on the outside, they’ve got their crap
too. Even though I know it here, it just affirms that. And to never assume to be less than
or more than another person. Just affirms that place.”

In addition, Joan feels the life review group increased her ability to listen to
another’s story and reframe it for them: “That was my goal, to listen and see what would
be the most important, essential piece to reflect. If anything it strengthened that skill.
While in the group Joan tried to stay focused on what was coming up for the other readers
and not for herself in the stories and she became a little frustrated in the group experience
when other group members focused on themselves: “So that was my goal and by
expressing that I am also aware of my judgments around how another person might work
with that and that I had antipathy towards another person’s work.” She feels that if there
had been open group process different interpretations and expectations around the
feedback experience would have been “grist for the mill”.

Joan feels that the peer support is very important and that the life review group
provided a vehicle for that. She feels that support and especially mentoring relationships
are missing from the masters program and she sees that as very unfortunate: “Now it’s a
funny thing, you are in counselling and there is no one counselling you, no one mentoring, saying, ‘what is going on inside now?’” She feels that as a result many counsellors do not seek help when they are naturally having problems: “So it gets held in. Call it burned out which means I finally hit the wall of myself and I can’t work anymore because I doubt myself, I haven’t done anything on myself so I don’t know where I am anymore and I don’t know if I am helping or not.”

As far as her own self-care, Joan feels that the group affirmed her awareness and a trust in herself: “Trust that my life is going the way it needs to go and I am doing what I need to do…the trust in myself and listening to myself and if I need something, going and doing it.” She feels that the group was very valuable, she really enjoyed it and was thankful to have been a part of it: “I looked forward to it between the thousand other things I was doing and each time I came out of there I thought, ‘wow’.”
Thematic Results

The feedback given by the participants revealed that the life review group was a very positive experience for all the students. The themes that emerged from the analysis of the narrative summaries that related to benefits attributed to the life review group are described and exemplified below followed by themes related to suggestions for improving the life review group experience.

Benefits

1. Felt the group was a safe venue for experimenting with self-disclosure

Several students revealed a desire to overcome what they saw as personal challenges related to disclosing in a group context and they found this group experience to be an opportunity to share things that they would not typically share otherwise. The participants commented that they felt safe to take these risks in the group. All the students commented that they felt very safe and comfortable in the group, and both Joan and Mark related the feelings of safety to the structure of the life review process. Sam and Lynne saw the fact that all the group members were in counselling psychology and thus skilled at listening and giving each other feedback as contributing to the comfort they experienced in the group. Participants commented that they found the facilitator to also be skilled in giving feedback, caring and supportive. Although there was a feeling of wanting to honour the group by revealing themselves, the students did not feel coerced into sharing in the group, and they felt they had control and choices over what was shared. Comments by Joan, for example, describe this experience:
The spirituality that I carry could exist there without being explicit and I could share it in a way that I felt was risky and I did it. I could have left it out and I decided no, I am just going to put it on the table. It is a big piece of me. So it was a place to share that when I normally don’t. Yeah, so that was quite a big piece for me. It was quite emotionally charged for me to actually share this is how I experience the world and spirituality and that whole piece was strong for me.

2. Group members modeled taking risks and self-disclosing

Related to the above theme were the comments by the participants that there was a high level of self-disclosure in the life review group and that the disclosures made by group members helped them each to share as well. Students commented that they witnessed their peers being vulnerable, and that as one group participant was able to disclose, others seemed to then be able to disclose more in turn. The participants saw their fellow group members share things that were highly charged emotionally and witnessed the relief experienced after these disclosures were made. Mark and Lynne both experienced the process around the disclosures as very respectful, and realized that the group members making these disclosures were okay and not treated differently afterwards. Comments by Lynne, for example, illustrate this theme:

And people seemed quite comfortable talking about personal things. And I have a hard time trusting people so I thought I am not going to be able to get into this and I found myself into it and quite comfortable. There was some hesitancy talking about things but everyone else was so giving and I
thought I’m going to try and it may not be totally comfortable for me but I am going to try and see what happens.

3. Opportunity to experience what the students had learned about in theory

Although one of the participants had quite extensive previous experience as a group member and was a self-described “group junkie” (Joan), the other group members did not. These participants related that they felt this was their first real experience as group members even though two of these students commented that they had taken the group course and had been a part of a small group experience as a result. Both Lynne and Shawna revealed that they felt that the life review group experience was a more authentic group member experience for them and that they knew more about what it is like to be group members following the life review group. Lynne also commented that she feels the life review group will affect how she now looks at journal articles and studies because she will be able to relate what she reads to her own experience in the life review group.

There were comments from all the students, with the exception of Joan, that they had a better understanding of group processes from participating in the life review group. Sam, for example, commented about experiencing for herself, and thus having a further appreciation for, what she had learned about in theory in terms of “unfinished business”. Mark also stressed having learned about more about group processes and commented that he benefited from witnessing things first hand in the life review group:

So to watch a student and say wow here is somebody disclosing something for the first time that is incredibly intense and they have been carrying it
for a long time, it’s a huge risk and very powerful. So charged emotionally. And then to watch their body even as they did it and received feedback and realized they were okay and started to feel better about what they just shared. You can read about that in books, how important that is, but to see it. It was amazing.

Students also individually commented about having a better understanding of various aspects of helping others that they knew about in theory but became more aware of as a result of the life review group experience; such as what clients experience, the need for self-care practices and the honouring of individual differences. Both Shawna and Mark also felt they understood more of the narrative perspective as a result of the life review and the experience of re-authoring their own life stories.

4. Students reflected on their life review group experiences in terms of counselling others/leading groups

As a result of experiences in the life review group, the students reflected on how they may experience working with individual clients or leading groups and related learning from the life review group to work with future clients. While Joan reflected on the life group experience as a possible way to work with clients in the future, Shawna related her willingness to take risks to self-disclose to having a better understanding of what her own clients will experience in sharing. Lynne sees herself as being a more effective group leader as a result of the life review group experience, more aware of the
leader's role in the group process, and more aware of how her own beliefs and values may impact the counselling process:

I saw that and I thought, part of me was jealous because I don’t have that kind of belief in something bigger than myself, but it also really made me see how that would impact how she counseled and I thought about how is my maybe non-belief going to impact how I counsel and how am I going to deal with clients who do have a strong belief. Am I going to be the best counsellor for them, how am I going to navigate that?

Lynne felt that despite the fact that she may have considered previously how her values could impact the counselling process with clients, witnessing other group members express their values brought the issue to her attention in a concrete way.

Additionally, both Mark and Sam related their experience in the life review group to how they may be affected when helping others when intense feelings are shared. Mark, for example, comments that he realized from the life review experience how challenging it may be at times for him to stay present with clients, and to questioning how he is going to take care of himself in his work:

There were a couple of times when it was very intense in this experience and afterwards getting out and driving home and realizing I was still carrying some of that inside...so it was a great way of saying, “yeah, what am I going to do when I am doing this work constantly and I have a day where there are three of these things that hit me like a ton of bricks and now I have to go home.”
5. **Peers in the life review group became support network**

Several of the participants expressed that they felt some initial concern about being with their peers in the life review group. Lynne, for example, related her concerns to perceived competitiveness in the Master's program and worried about revealing herself in a group of her peers; and, Shawna wondered what it would be like in courses later when she saw her peers again. However, all the participants related that they felt the group was very supportive and they now see those peers in the group as a support network. The students feel that they have bonded with each other, got to know each other well and can count on each other as people they could talk to in the Master’s program if they wanted. Shawna, for example commented: “If I was stuck I know that those are people that I can trust and I wouldn’t hesitate if I thought that there was something school-related that I needed to talk to someone about then I would feel comfortable talking to anybody that was in the group”. Mark also echoes these feelings: “I certainly count all these people in all cases as someone who if I needed to talk to someone I could go to each one of these people and do that.”

6. **Acceptance of positive feedback.**

The ability to accept positive feedback from others was identified as a challenge by several of the participants. Still, they revealed that during the life review group experience they found that they were able to relate to and absorb positive feedback on their strengths because of what they perceived as the credibility of the other group members. This credibility, in turn, was related to knowing that these peers knew their stories and therefore really “knew” them. The comments from these peers, therefore,
carried more weight and substance and were easier for the students to believe. Shawna, for example, comments about the validity of the feedback from life review group members as compared to other people in her life:

Because a lot of times (other) people would say something about me but I would think “yeah, but you don’t really know me, so you can’t say that.” But because they (the group members) heard my experiences, I think they pretty much know me. And even for the last day we went around and said what we appreciated about each other and that felt really good because I thought these are some people that really know me.

7. **Gained new awareness of self**

The students all commented that they learned new things about themselves through the life review group experience. They were able to recognize personal strengths and abilities that they were not cognizant of before. Sam, for example, revealed that when the group facilitator named her playfulness for her, it “brought it up to the table and I went, yeah, I do, do that. Then it became a strength, a usable thing.” Sam also discovered for the first time that she writes very creatively, in a style appreciated by others. Other participants mentioned new awareness of strengths such as a belief in themselves, leadership abilities, spontaneity, and having a sense of humour.

Group members also became aware of challenges from the life review process. For example, Lynne realized that challenges for her are how to manage her own personal disclosure as a group leader and being comfortable with accepting support from others.
Shawna realized that she has challenges in terms of being open in front of a group of peers and coming back to the present from deep emotional places. She also commented on a new awareness for her in terms of how she has coped with challenges:

I never noticed before how much I was like that... I think the reality is that I have a very moving on, keep climbing, keep going kind of aspect to me which is good, because that is how I cope. Just keep going and move ahead, instead of sitting and pondering and worrying about it, I leave it behind... And realizing that I am like that is something that I like because I thought that I was a person that does stay with things.

8. Aspects of self are validated, highlighted or confirmed.

The students expressed a sense of validation that they attributed to their life review group experience, and there were certain aspects of self that were not necessarily new realizations for the students but that they felt were highlighted or confirmed as a result of the life review group experience. Firstly, the participants stated that the life review brought a general feeling of being encouraged about their lives and validation for the people they are and where they are at in their life. Comments about a sense that one is doing fine (Joan), Shawna’s feeling that her sensitivity and crying easily is okay, and Mark’s comments regarding being affirmed for the man that he is, are examples related to feelings of validation that emerged as a result of the life review group.

Secondly, the group participants revealed that the life review brought things into focus and highlighted aspects of self that they were already aware of and in the process of
developing. For example, Sam relates that in the group she had the experience of something she was aware of before and is trying to move past: “It's another example of yes, I am still doing that and I am asking myself to be more careful around my first impressions of people”. Lynne also was aware of her challenge to trust others and she felt this was highlighted for her in the life review group experience and Mark relates that he saw his struggle with perfectionism in a concrete way in various life review themes and that self care is a never-ending process. There was also a feeling by the participants that aspects of self were confirmed or rediscovered in the life review process such as motivations for entering the counselling field and various strengths such as the participants’ artistic side or creativity. These were examples of self-awareness that were revealed by the participants to be distinct from “new” awareness as exemplified in the theme above.

9. Affirmation of non-judgmental stance and individual differences

As the participants got to know each other through the self-disclosure in the life review group, they expressed that they came to appreciate their individual differences. The students related that the life review group thus helped to affirm a non-judgmental stance towards others. Lynne comments, for example, that hearing group members’ stories and what they each went through gave her a new perspective, “because we tend to make judgments about people, like ‘I know this person, I know what they are about’. And to find these things out about people, amazing courage and stuff and that you would never know.” The participants related that they did not feel judged by the others in the group
and their experience in the group affirmed a need to take a non-judgmental stance towards others.

10. Seeing self in lives of others.

The participants also expressed becoming aware of commonalities in all their experiences and benefiting from seeing that others went through similar trials and tribulations. From these realizations there was a sense of camaraderie in the life review group and a feeling of not being alone in their struggles. Shawna comments for example, “I didn’t feel so left out there, everyone is out there doing this... it’s not me against the world”, and Mark also relates:

A lot of the time, you feel that you are an island and no one else feels this way or has this problem and in the course of the life review you are hearing four other people share their stories and you realize “wow, there are a lot of similarities here”. And that helps shed light on my experience but it also helps me to say that I guess I am doing as well, or better then I thought I was doing.

There was a comfort expressed by the participants in knowing that others had gone through similar challenges and coped with similar issues.

11. Learned from each other’s experiences

Related to the above theme were the comments by the students that they felt they benefited from learning how their fellow group members each coped with different challenges and got through stressful times in their lives. Shawna, for example, relates that
she looked forward each week to the life review group experience, “And I got to go to
listen to people’s stories of their lives and learn from other people, what they were
experiencing and how people got through.” Lynne also appreciated learning how other
group members dealt with things and group members, such as Joan, came to see the life
review experience as an opportunity to give each other insights and share with the other
group members from their own learning: “There became a teaching, sharing quality that
came through for me that I wanted to give. It was like a gift and by the end it felt like
even more of a gift not only to me but to the group itself. The group itself started to build
something that we could give each other.”

12. Reframing of negative life events and experiences.

The participants related that the life review group experience helped them to
reframe negative life events and experiences more positively and that they experienced
changes in perspective and beliefs about themselves. Sam for example relates that the
group’s feedback helped her to reframe what she saw as missed opportunities when she
was younger into a strength at this time in her life: “How that can all be reframed into yes,
but you are doing it now and the strength of doing things out of order. And the courage to
still do that. That was given to me.” Shawna commented that the reframing of her life
experiences from the life review group experience helped her see things more positively
and will affect how she looks at things and copes in the future when the past re-emerges:

When it came at me I thought, well my first thought was “oh no what if I
go back to dealing with it the way I was dealing with it before”. Then I
thought “no, I don’t have to do that. I can keep looking at it differently
now"... It was easier for me to say, "no, no you are strong and you can get through this because look how far you have come and you are not going to look at it in any other way".

Mark also shared his writing from one of the life review themes with a family member and gained new awareness and perspective: "So for the first time in my life, it doesn’t matter if that is the truth or not, I have an alternative explanation that provides some sort of significant meaning for me." Like other group members, he was able to reframe a negative life experience in terms of a personal strength and experience some relief from that as a result of the life review process.


The participants expressed coming to some resolution about issues they brought forward in the life review group process and a feeling that they integrated some past experiences. Joan described her experience of this process as a "digesting process" where grief and loss issues were opened up in the life review, reflected on, considered and then she was able to move on. For other participants who had shared things in the group that they had not shared before, it was the feedback from the other group members that specifically helped them towards some resolution. Lynne, for example, was able to disclose something sensitive in her past to the group and the reaction of the group members was a relief for her:

It was kind of like, "Oh that must have been difficult for you, okay. That’s fine." I felt like I was able to let that go almost. Because I have been carrying this around and to have these people that I know but not know say,
"Okay that happened. That sucks. It doesn’t change anything”... That was very freeing for me.”

Mark feels that he may be more comfortable with comments given by others as a result of the life group experience, and Shawna also commented on coming to some resolution with issues including her discomfort with crying in the group. The group members gave her feedback that they did not feel uncomfortable when she cried: “It was good to hear that they didn’t experience it like that, they didn’t feel that they had to help me. That it was just me.”

14. Highlighted aspects of self that could be explored further.

The group members commented that the life review process highlighted areas that they may now want to explore further. Joan referred to the life review process as a doorway in; and, for Joan, one of the themes in particular brought out areas that she feels she can look into further: “Because there are still some sticky spots and some grieving in there. I need to spend some time on that so I can be freer... So when I got into that topic, realizing what was still there for me was helpful.” Mark realized that there were issues that emerged in the theme of family that he will continue to explore more: “For example in the issue of family that was a good theme and I got a lot of stuff but it was just scratching the surface, there was a lot of stuff... So it gave me a sense that a lot of this stuff is stuff that I don’t think you can ever close the door on and I want to continue working with it.”
15. Timeliness

The participants commented that the life review group experience came at a good time in their lives. Several of the participants identified going through personal transitions at the time that the life review group occurred and they felt that they were given courage and support in that process from the group. Sam for example comments: "The group and what happened there has supported me in individuating and saying to myself, hey this might not fit those people over there but it feels good to me, so I can do it, I am going to take the risk". Mark also related that the life review group came at a good time because it gave him a chance to reflect and build on things that he had been in a process of exploring; and, Lynne felt that the life review was timely because she had begun to think in terms of conscious purpose and the life review helped her become more aware of her motivations for being a counsellor.

Suggestions

1. Include more group sessions or make an ongoing group

Most of the participants expressed that they felt that they could have benefited from more group sessions or an ongoing group. Mark did not want the group to end and would have appreciated more sessions, Lynne felt the group could have become a "regular thing" and Shawna also comments that she would have liked an ongoing group: "Just because it was the time in the week to force me to do the writing and I got the opportunity to go and be heard and know that I was talking to people who were listening to me."
2. **Space in the group process for further exploration**

Two of the participants expressed that they would have liked the group sessions to be longer or more flexible to allow for further exploration of topics. Mark for example comments that he would have appreciated more time or longer sessions: “I like to ask questions and I like to hear people explain things...there were times when I would have liked to have continued with some of the stuff that people were saying to me.” Joan also related that she could have benefited from exploring some topics more:

> So I didn’t get much out of that reframe because it was so tiny compared to how big that issue was for me. That was my biggest one. Because that was a very hard time in my life. That didn’t really come out in the group. So I guess that would be a downside to the structure because when someone could benefit from exploring something on a deeper level, that space isn’t there.

Joan suggests leaving more space in the sessions for group members to explore further or having the ability to repeat themes in following sessions.

3. **Make life review group available for other Master’s students**

Several of the participants expressed that the life review group experience would be worthwhile for their peers to be able to experience as part of the Master’s program. Lynne comments that she gained new awareness from being a group member that will make her more informed about what she is learning and thus a better counsellor. She feels this opportunity should be part of the Master’s program for other students. Mark also relates that he found the life review to be a gentle way to do personal development work
that others could benefit from as well: “It gives you the chance to go as deep as you want without being forced into a therapeutic group where you have to do that.” As well, Joan thought the life review group is especially relevant for beginning counsellors to experience:

I think it was a very good vehicle for counsellors to be with others who are counsellors and experience their lack of perfect professionality, which is often very difficult to break through in group process. Counsellors are the worst. “I am so perfect, I never had a problem, I don’t have issues. That’s why I’m a counsellor”. Its classic. So that created a safe vehicle for counsellors to gently break through.
Chapter V
DISCUSSION

Every story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship: it prevents the telling of other tales.

~Salman Rushdie

Introduction

From the results of this exploratory evaluation of the pilot of the Personal Development through Life Review program fifteen themes emerged related to the benefits that the participants attributed to the life review group experience and three themes related to suggestions for further improvement. In this chapter I will first reflect on the Personal Development through Life Review program by relating these themes to the goals, objectives and strengths of the program and highlighting recommendations. I will then discuss theoretical implications, and implications for practice and future research, as well as the delimitations of this study.

Reflections on the Personal Development through Life Review Program

From the results of the pilot project it would appear that the first goal of the program to provide a safe environment for students’ self-exploration was achieved. The life review group experience was conducive to students’ self-disclosures. The students felt the group was a safe venue for experimenting with risk-taking, and they modeled taking those risks to share with each other.

The second goal of the program, to further students’ commitment to attending to their personal development through personal therapy, group therapy, peer group
consultation, supervision or other self-care practices did not emerge as a theme in the results of this study. A theme that related to this goal was that the life review group experience highlighted aspects of self that the students felt could be explored further; yet, a commitment to that exploration was not revealed by most of the participants. Only one participant, Mark, identified a further commitment to plan for self-care as a result of the life review group experience.

One could surmise that this particular gap in the participants' narratives could be due to the fact that issues related to the importance of personal development have not been part of the curriculum in the Master's program at the University of British Columbia. One of the suggestions highlighted by the literature is the need to instill awareness of personal development by formally teaching students about the importance of self-care practices (e.g. Cushway, 1996). It may be that the students will not recognize the imperative for a continuing commitment to personal development without having that formal instruction along with the life review group experience.

Several themes did emerge in the results of the study, however, that confirmed the stated objectives of the program. The students reported increased self-awareness in terms of new awareness as well as aspects of self that were validated, highlighted or confirmed; including personal strengths, challenges and coping skills. The life review group experience affirmed a non-judgmental stance towards others and an appreciation of individual differences. The students felt that they had an opportunity to experience various aspects of group membership, group leadership, and helping others that they
related to what they had learned about in theory; and, they also reflected on their life review experience in terms of counselling others and leading groups. Lastly, the participants experienced the change process in terms of reframing of negative life events and experiences in addition to feeling some resolution about issues and aspects of self. In general, then, several of the objectives of the program were revealed by the thematic results of this study.

Objectives such as an increased awareness of needs and motivations for helping others, plans for maintaining emotional well-being or relating their own emotional health to counselling effectiveness were commented on by individual participants but did not emerge strongly in the thematic results. It may be that the life review themes did not tap those aspects and it will be necessary in future practice to develop a specific theme related to the experience of beginning counsellors in this regard. Birren & Deutchman (1991) also developed an elective theme for use in life review titled “Your experience with stress” that may be suitably modified for use in future groups with Master’s students.

One of the strengths of the program was revealed strongly in the thematic results: The program fostered peer support. The students felt that their peers in the life review group became a support network; that they bonded with each other and could count on each other as people they could approach if having difficulties in the Master’s program. A related theme also emerged with the students seeing commonalities in their experiences and aspects of themselves in the lives of each other. This helped the participants to feel connected with each other; that they were not alienated and alone in their struggles. The
group members also learned from each other’s experiences in terms of how they coped with challenges and got through difficult times in their lives. One of the group members described this in terms of a gift that they gave each other. In summary, the life review group provided the students with peers in the Master’s program that they learned from, knew them really well and that they could count on for support.

In addition, although the students did not express relating the support they received in the life review group to normalizing or easing the transition to graduate work (a proposed strength of the program), they did find the group experience timely in terms of other personal transitions and processes. This finding affirms what has been highlighted in the literature that graduate students can experience a variety of personal stressors in the midst of training that can leave them feeling vulnerable and in need of support (Gustitus, Golden & Hazler, 1986; Johns, 1996). It should also be noted that this particular group experience did not occur until the students were in the second half of their first winter term and most of the students had begun their programs in the previous summer. These students, then, had been through almost a full year of their graduate program already when the life review group experience occurred.

As noted in the narrative of one participant, the life review group process also provided an opportunity for the students to practice giving each other positive feedback and reframing negative events. Even though this was not a theme in the pilot study results it may be noted as a possible further strength of the program in providing students with that experience.
Lastly in regard to the strengths of the program, the students were able to experience the life review method and may decide to use this approach in work with their own clients. Although again notsurfacing as a strong theme in the narratives, this was one of the reasons that Lynne decided to participate in the life review group experience, for example, because of her interest in the method and certainly Joan mentioned that she now considers the life review as a tool that she could use in the future in group work.

There were three themes that were revealed in analysis of the narratives related to suggestions for the future of the program. The participants expressed that they would be interested in more group sessions or an ongoing group experience. This can be considered very encouraging and it may be worthwhile in the future to have additional sessions in which other life review themes could be explored, or as suggested by Joan, have the flexibility to repeat themes. Although a couple of the students expressed wanting more space to process issues further in the life review sessions, this could take away from the safety of the group structure and it is my opinion that having students seek other resources for further exploration may be more appropriate. One of the benefits of the life review process is that it can be therapeutic and it does appear to allow for the identification of issues for further exploration as was revealed in the thematic results; however, the life review group experience is not intended to be group therapy. Deeper processing of issues is not intended to be part of this program and it is one of the goals of the program that students be motivated and encouraged to continue their personal development by other means. Finally, it is also encouraging that the participants felt that this program could be
beneficial to their peers and that opportunities such as the Personal Development through Life Review program should be made available to all students in the Master’s program.

Theoretical Implications

Some of the benefits that were apparent from the findings of the pilot project of the Personal Development through Life Review program are similar to those found in the literature related to research with various other adult populations experiencing the life review method. Thematic results from the pilot study confirm findings summarized in Birren & Deutchman (1991) and DeVries, Birren & Deutchman (1995) that life review helps with the recognition of coping strategies, increases self-understanding, participants’ sense of social connectedness and willingness to disclose to others. The finding that the students found the life review group experience a safe venue for experimenting with self-disclosure and a place to share things that they typically would not is similar to findings in exploratory research with peacekeeping soldiers who experienced life review as part of a personal and career transition program (Westwood, 1999). In feedback sessions, World War II and Korean War veteran participants in other programs using the life review method also identified benefits including feelings of support from other group members; validation of experiences; greater reconciliation and resolution of past experiences; and benefiting from seeing ways others have met life’s challenges (Westwood, 1998). All these benefits of the life review method were also confirmed in the thematic results of this pilot project.
This study also validates the therapeutic potential of the life review method and its self-diagnostic function as espoused by Brown-Shaw, Westwood & deVries (1999). In the results of this research there was a clear indication that the participants felt some resolution about issues that were revealed in the life review process. Lynne, for example, relates a classic example of the “Oh phenomenon” that has been described in life review literature in her narrative summary: the anxiety experienced before revealing a sensitive aspect of her life story that she has been “carrying” and the subsequent relief (“freeing”) she experiences in the “non-reaction” of the group members to this disclosure. The group participants also commented that the life review process highlighted areas that they would like to continue to explore further. This finding affirms the usefulness of life review, as revealed by Joan, as a doorway in to aspects of the self that could then be explored more using other therapeutic approaches. Currently life review is used in this way in work with peacekeeping soldiers (Westwood, Black & McLean, submitted) and it may be possible to use life review with other populations working with trauma such as medical personnel, police officers and emergency response personnel as a means to identify issues that could be processed further using approaches such as therapeutic enactment.

Implications for Practice

The Personal Development through Life Review program appears to offer a viable means for facilitating students’ personal development in counsellor training. Given that there is a need for and a lack of such opportunities in counsellor training this is an important finding of the pilot project. Students desired this opportunity and there was no difficulty in getting interested participants. The only difficulty came in my endeavor to
get the group sessions to co-ordinate with all the students' schedules and losing participants in this process. If the program were to be offered as a course within the counsellor education curriculum, students would be able to plan their schedules to fit with the life review group sessions. Although exploratory, several of the thematic results showed that the life review experience fostered the participants personal development in ways related to becoming an effective helping professional. As stressed by Irving & Williams (1999), personal development needs to be seen as context-specific; defined in terms of particular personal attributes, qualities, skills and understandings that are relevant for competent and safe counselling practice. Having identified such a definition, the life review method appears to offer a means to facilitate personal development in students as a component of counsellor training.

Furthermore, aspects of the findings of this pilot project clearly have other implications for counsellor training. The finding that the participants attributed the benefit of acceptance of positive feedback to the life review group experience is noteworthy, for example. Several of the students in the life review group expressed that the ability to accept positive feedback was a challenge for them. In the literature on small group work, it is corrective feedback that is typically considered more difficult to receive than positive feedback (Toth & Erwin, 1998). Mark describes in his narrative his experience of on the surface seeming to accept positive feedback while voices on the inside are in rebuttal; an experience echoed by other participants. The students found that they were able to absorb the positive feedback from other group members because they saw them as people who really knew them, knew their life story, challenges, trials and struggles and therefore were
credible feedback providers in their eyes. This could be a useful finding to bear in mind and perhaps explore further in terms of teaching or motivating other populations including adult learners and adolescents (particularly at-risk youth).

It is also evident that the Personal Development through Life Review program provided the students an opportunity to learn experientially. Various principles of experiential learning were affirmed by the thematic results and narrative accounts of the participants in the life review group experience such as: People will believe more in knowledge they have discovered themselves than in knowledge presented by others; it takes more than information to change action theories, attitudes and behavioral patterns; it takes firsthand experience to generate valid knowledge; and the more supportive, accepting and caring the social environment, the freer a person is to experiment with new behaviors, attitudes and action theories. The life review group experience was in line with these principles and the students benefited from it. In several cases, for example, the student participants expressed having “known” about certain issues related to helping others such as the need for self-care practices (Mark), implications of one’s own beliefs and values for counselling others (Lynne) or the value of respecting individual differences (Sam) but found that it was the life review group experience that, in the words of Mark, put that awareness into practice and caused them to really consider these issues.

It is important to question, then, how the students would have come to the above realizations as well as other relevant considerations for helping others without the life review group experience. What is the impact of not having these kinds of experiences for
the learning of counsellor trainees? Do graduate programs that take responsibility for the education of counsellors want to send their students into the community not fully cognizant of the implications of such issues relevant for counselling practice? Is that ethically responsible of the program to do so? Such questions are important to consider.

From the results of this exploratory evaluation, the students clearly related their experiences in the life review group sessions to course learning and extrapolated from their experiences in the life review group to counselling others and leading groups, an affirmation of the value of experiential learning and an important finding for the future of counsellor training.

Implications for future research

This pilot project was exploratory in nature. After adding more sessions and including some modified themes in the Personal Development through Life Review program, the next step would be to build and expand on this research by conducting a more extensive evaluation. It would be advisable to include more students in the process at the University of British Columbia and quantitative along with qualitative approaches. Following a more extensive evaluation, it would also be worthwhile to approach other counsellor education programs to pilot the life review within their training programs. Although perhaps difficult to undertake it would be most interesting as well to follow several students who completed the life review experience over time once they had completed their graduate studies and entered the field.
Another worthwhile research initiative would be to pilot the life review group experience with teams of counsellors working in agencies, mental health and college counselling centers as a way of introducing the premise of personal development to helping professionals already in the field and seeing if the benefits are similar to students in training.

Delimitations

Although qualitative methodology provided the thick descriptions that helped to elucidate the students' experience of the pilot of the Personal Development through Life Review program, it has certain limitations. For example, the number of participants with a qualitative approach is small and the ability to generalize the results and ensure validity of the findings, therefore, limited. Secondly, the influence of myself, the research interviewer is more apparent especially since the participants are my peers in graduate training. Acknowledging the influence of my own values and beliefs keeps the findings trustworthy, but my influence needs to be mentioned as a possible limitation to this work. It may also be that these participants represent a highly motivated sample of graduate students and further investigation of the program in terms of benefits for students' personal development is recommended.

Conclusion

Although the reader of this work needs to be aware of the limitations of the findings of this study, the results from this exploratory case study of the pilot program of the Personal Development through Life Review program are very positive. Themes that
emerged from the analysis of the narrative summaries of the participants who provided feedback on their experience related to at least one of the goals of the program, several program objectives and strengths. It would be beneficial in the future to include more instruction related to the benefits of personal development for counsellors in the Master's curriculum in addition to providing a specific theme in the life review group experience to access particular aspects of personal development for helping professionals. In the future it may also be beneficial to follow the recommendation from the participants to include more group sessions in the program.

The results of this study also confirmed benefits previously revealed in the research literature on life review, and in particular, affirmed the therapeutic potential and self-diagnostic usefulness of the method. As well this research has significant implications for counsellor training as it appears to offer an experiential, viable and effective opportunity for counselling psychology students' personal development. This is indeed encouraging given the need for such opportunities for personal development to be made available in graduate training so that counsellors can learn to be proactive about the issues that arise in the context of helping others.
References


Appendix A

Informed Consent
You may also contact Dr. Richard Spratley, Director of the U.B.C. Office of Research Services and Administration, at 822-8598, if you have any concerns about your rights or treatment as a research participant.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence. I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records. I consent to participate in this study.

Subject signature

Date

Signature of witness

Date
Appendix B

Life Review Group Leading Guidelines
LIFE REVIEW GROUP:
FACILITATOR GUIDELINES

1. The group leader reminds group members that the purpose of reading their story into the group is to help them integrate their own experience and benefit from having the story listened to and witnessed by others in the group.

2. Reminds the group members that they each have the same air time, and that they can read as much or as little of what they have written as they want up to a maximum of two type written or four hand written pages.

3. After each group member has read their story into the group, the leader should comment: “What were you aware of as you read the story to the group?”

4. Reflect and clarify what the reader has said then do a go around with the other group members, asking each one: “What part of the story impacted you the most?” or “What did you get from this story that was most important to you?”

5. Remind the group members that their task is to help amplify and expand awareness for the reader by asking for clarification if needed and using open-ended questions. The leader may need to remind listeners to be careful to speak only from their own experience using “I” statements.

6. The group leader monitors equal “air time” and moves the group members along to avoid the last reader being short changed.
Appendix C

Life Review Group Agreement
LIFE REVIEW
Facilitator: Marlene Finlayson
Fridays, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.
March 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, April 7, 14, 28 and May 5th

Group Agreement

Guidelines to make the shared experience rich and rewarding for everyone...

*This group experience will be stronger if everyone attends all the sessions. Group members will notify the group in advance if unable to attend sessions.

*We can respect each other by arriving on time.

*To help everyone be comfortable with the group sharing, we will keep what is shared during the group sessions confidential. You have a right to this confidentiality and to your personal privacy. The names of people in the group and the things we talk about will be kept within the group; however, you are free to talk about your own experience outside the group, always being wary of breaching another group member’s privacy.

*You have a right to privacy within the group too. If you don’t want to participate in any discussion, you can “Pass”. If someone is directing comments or questions to you that make you feel uncomfortable, you can say, “Stop” at any time.

*We welcome different beliefs and values within this group. We can respect and affirm each other by honoring our different viewpoints and not judging each other. We will speak only from our own experience, using “I” statements.

*Many of us are used to thinking that the way to support another person is through helpful comments, suggestions and advice. In this group no advice will be given unless specifically requested.
Appendix D

Guidelines for Writing on Life Review Themes
GUIDELINES FOR WRITING

Before each group meeting I would like you to prepare 2 typewritten (or 4 handwritten) pages of your thoughts on the theme being discussed for that meeting. Each theme is described for you and there are questions for you to consider as you reflect and write. Do not be put off by all the questions! These are given as guide to promote and encourage your thinking. You may answer some of them, all of them or none of them- that is absolutely fine. Remember, this is your life story!

It has been found that there is a marked difference in the value of life review between people who write and people who do not. There seems to be something in the act of writing that stimulates more reflection and makes the process of life review more meaningful. I believe that you will soon discover that this is the most enjoyable homework you have ever done. Grammar, spelling, and proper sentence structure do not matter at all. This absence of a requirement for grammatical correctness may seem strange at first.

Many life review participants also report feeling self-conscious the first time they read aloud. This does not last long, however. You will soon find yourself enjoying the process of writing, reading and listening. As you listen to other’s stories you will find your own reflections enhanced. As you compare and contrast your life with those of others in the group you may come away with a greater appreciation for the life you have known.

Your writing is yours to keep. Some participants share it with family members or friends. Others keep it private. It is completely up to you. You may also find with different themes that you write more than is expected. You can choose what you wish to read into the group and therefore may not read all that you have written. In the group, participants read a maximum of 2 typewritten (or 4 handwritten) pages on the relevant theme for that meeting.

If the amount of writing seems onerous, or too difficult- just jot down some notes. To make this as rewarding an experience for you as possible, it is important that you have reflected on the meeting’s theme and then written about it in some form.

*Adapted from Guidelines for Writing, Life Review Program for Canadian Peacekeepers.
Appendix E

Life Review Themes
Theme Assignment: The Major Branching Points in Your Life

Think of your life as a branching tree, as a flowing river that has many juncture points, or as a trailing plant that puts down roots at various places and then grows on.

What is a branching point? Branching points are events, experiences, or happenings in our lives that significantly affect the direction or flow of our life. Branching points are experiences that shape our lives in some important way.

Branching points may be big events (e.g., marriage, retirement, geographical move) or they may seem small and apparently inconsequential (e.g., reading a book, going on a hike). Big outcomes may have small beginnings.

From your point of view, what were the major branching points in your life? What were the events, experiences, interactions with people and places that had a major influence or impact on the way your life has flowed?

Sensitizing Questions

1. About how old were you at the time of the branching point? Place the turning point along a time dimension. The timing of an event is often very important. Did it happen too soon? Were you too young? Did it happen too late? Were you too old?
2. Significant people? Who were the important people involved in the turning point? Father, mother, spouse? You alone? Often one notices that the same people are involved again and again in major life turning points.
3. Emotions and feelings at the time? What were the feelings, the emotions you experienced at the time the branching point occurred? How intense were these feelings (e.g., extremely elated, somewhat sad, a little frustrated, very happy)? Sometimes our feelings in reaction to an experience are mixed or are changeable. Do not be concerned if your feelings seem contradictory.
4. Emotions and feelings now? Sometimes our feelings about an experience or event change over time. Something that seemed a disaster when it happened may turn out to be a positive event later on and vice versa. What emotions do you experience as you think about the turning point now?
5. Personal choice? How much personal choice was involved in this branching point? How much personal control did you have? Was it something that happened that was completely out of your control? Who or what was the external influence?
6. Consequences? Branching points are “branching points” because they change our lives in one or many ways. In your view, what are the ways your life was changed because of this branching point? What effect, impact, consequences, did it have on your life? How would your life have been different if it had not occurred?

Theme Assignment: Your Major Life Work or Career

What is a career? It is your major life’s work. It occupies your energy, your activity and your time. A career, a life work can have many forms. Usually we think of it as work for pay. Yet, a life work can also be found in being a husband, a wife, a parent, or in religious devotion, in play, in art, in education, in community service. This does not necessarily involve a salary or pay. People can have a number of careers, a sequence of careers, or both.

What has been your major life’s work or career?

Sensitizing Questions

1. How did you get into your major life work? How did you find it? Did you choose if because your family expected it? Was it because of a teacher you knew? Did your appearance have anything to do with it? When did you begin your life work?
2. How early did your formulate your life career goals? What did you want to be when you grew up? How have childhood interests, passions, teachers, influenced the path your life work has taken? How much choice did you have?
3. What has been the developmental course of your life work? Has it been continuous? Discontinuous? What have been the peaks and valleys? Have there been major or minor setbacks? Major changes in focus? Have you had a sequence or series of careers?
4. What have been the biggest influences in directing the path of your career once chosen? For example, people, places, events?
5. If you do not have a major life work (yet) what would you like to do? Why?
6. If you feel you have finished your major life work, how do you evaluate it?
7. How has your work provided options? Limited options?
8. Are you “on time” in your career or ahead or behind in terms of your expectations?
9. What are and have been the challenges of your life work? Your successes? The problems? The failures?
10. If you have more than one life-work identity, which of these has been the most important to you? Why?
11. What has been unique or special about your work experiences? Place or work? Travel? People?
12. What have you enjoyed the most about your life work? Least?
13. If you had to do it over again, how would you develop differently along your life work path? Would you choose the same life work? Why or why not?

Source:

Theme Assignment: Your Family

What is your family? This history of your family includes your family of origin (among them, grandparents, parents, siblings, uncles and aunts) as well as your family of adulthood (among them, spouse, children, grandchildren).

The family members important in shaping your life should be mentioned, not necessarily all the family members. Some have been more important in positive ways and some in negative ways in shaping your life.

What family members have had a major impact in shaping your life? Why?

What would another person have to know about your family in order to understand you and how you’ve come to be the person you are?

Sensitizing Questions

1. Who held the power in your family? Why? Who made the decisions? How did you know?
2. Who offered support, warmth, and nurturance? Why? Who did you go to for comfort? Who did you confide in?
3. What major family member(s) have you been closest to? Why?
4. What important family member did you know the least? Feel the closest to? Why? Who should you have been close to but for some reason were not?
5. Did you like your family? Why or why not?
6. What was best about your family? Worst about it? What were (are) the strengths and weaknesses in your family?
7. Was there anyone in your family that you were afraid of? Why?
8. Who were the heroes in your family? The family favorites? How did you know?
9. What was the feeling tone in your family (e.g., happy, sad, crowded, spacious, noisy, quiet, warm, cold)?
10. What were the major areas of conflict, problems, and issues in your family?
11. What were the rules in your family, the “shoulds” and “oughts”?
12. What events and experiences have torn your family apart or have made your family stronger?
13. Were you loved? How did you know?

Source:

Theme Assignment: Your Health and Body Image

The image of your body and your health has many aspects, objective features, and subjective feelings. In part, it involves an implied comparison with other persons, whether you were (are) more or less healthy, stronger or weaker, coordinated or clumsy, attractive or unattractive. How do you regard your body and health?

What has been your history of your health and body image?

Sensitizing Questions

1. What was your health like as a baby? A child? Adolescent? Young adult? Middle-aged adult? Older adult?
2. Were you considered a sickly child? If so, what were the consequences for your development?
3. Were you a fast-developing or slow-developing child? Were you ahead or behind in growth as an adolescent?
4. What health problems have you experienced in your life? How did you feel about each of these? How did you handle these problems?
5. How has your body reacted to games and athletic sports?
6. In what ways does your body react to stress? Has this changed during your life? What do you do in response to your body’s stress signals?
7. What have you done during your life to help/hurt your health?
8. How would you describe your physical appearance as a baby? Child? Adolescent? Young adult? Middle-aged adult? Older adult? Are (were) you considered short, tall, thin, fat, attractive, ugly, poised, or awkward?
9. What part(s) of your body do you like the least? Why? How has this changed over your life?
10. What part(s) of your body do you like the most? Why? How has this changed over your life?
11. What have you done to alter, change, or improve your health and physical self during your life?
12. How do you regard your body in terms of female or male image?
13. If you could change your body in any way, how would you want it to be different?

Source:

Theme Assignment: Your Loves and Hates

Love is a strong emotional attachment to a particular person, place, or thing. Absence of the love object causes distress in the form of loneliness, anxiety, and longing. What have been the major loves of your life?

Hate is a strong feeling of dislike or ill will toward some person, place or thing. What have been the hates or strong aversions in your life?

Sensitizing Questions

1. What persons, places or things aroused your greatest feelings of love when you were a child?
2. Who was your first love?
3. Who in your life made you feel loved and why?
4. Were you ever consumed by love? When and under what circumstances?
5. What has been the role of love in your life? How has it changed over time?
6. Why did your loves end? What happens when you lose a love? Did your feelings change or did you lose the object of your love?
7. How have your ideas about love changed during your life?
8. What have been the major hates of your life? What places, people, events, characteristics of people, objects, ideas, or kinds of behavior cause you to feel extreme dislike?
9. What were your major dislikes as a child? How did they change with time?
10. Have you ever hated someone so much you wished they would die?
11. How have you expressed your hatred?
12. Have your hates changed over the years, or have they remained the same?
13. If you could wish ill will upon some person by voodoo or magic, who would it be?
14. Do you express your hate or keep it inside?
15. Do you have some strong unexpressed feelings of love for some person, place or thing?
16. When you were growing up, what were you taught about love and hate? How have your ideas changed?

Source:

**Theme Assignment: Your Sexual Identity, Sex Roles, and Sexual Experiences**

Sexuality includes our sexual identity (sense of ourselves as a male or female), our ideas about appropriate sex role behavior, and our sexual experiences.

What has been the history of your sexual development, including the development of your identity as male/female, your concepts of appropriate sex role behavior, and your sexual experiences?

**Sensitizing Questions**

1. When did you first learn/realize that you were a boy or a girl? When did you first realize that little boys and girls were different? How did you feel about that?
2. What toys did you use and what games did you play when you were a child? Were any kinds of play, toys, or games forbidden? What clothes were you dressed in as a child? What significance did this have in the development of your sexual identity?
3. Were you a “tomboy”? A “sissy”? A “fraidy cat”? Did you ever wish that you had been born the opposite sex? Why?
4. What did your parents, teachers, relatives teach you about what “good” girls and boys did and did not do? What were the rules for being a boy or a girl? What were your parents’ views about your sexuality?
5. Where did you get your sex education (from parents, friends, books, school, religious training)? Where and when did you learn the facts of life?
6. What were your early sexual experiences (such as doctor-and-nurse games)? Did you have childhood sweethearts?
7. Have you had any traumatic sexual experiences?
8. What have been your concepts or models of the “ideal” man or the “ideal” woman? How have these ideas changed as you have grown up and grown older?
9. What are your concepts about the “ideal” relationship between two people?
10. How would you characterize yourself as a man or a woman? How has this changed? What “traditionally” masculine or feminine aspects can you identify in yourself?
11. How do you relate to members of the opposite sex? How has this changed?
12. What has been the history of your sexual experiences? How have they changed as you’ve grown older? What factors have affected your sexual identity and sexual experiences?
13. How do you feel about your sexuality? Have your ideas and attitudes about appropriate sexual behavior changed over time?

Theme Assignment: Your Experiences with Death and Ideas about Death & Dying

Death can affect your life in many ways. You may have experienced the loss of a beloved pet as a child; you may have lost parents, grandparents, dear friends, a spouse, a child, a brother or sister. Maybe the death of a political hero affected you profoundly.

How have your experiences with death affected your life and your character? How have your reactions to death changed over the years? How have your ideas concerning your own death changed?

Sensitizing Questions

1. How did you feel about death when you were a child? Did you lose an animal that was like a member of the family? What did you think when your pet died?
2. How was death talked about and treated in your family? Did it frighten you? How did you understand it?
3. When did you go to your first funeral? How did you react?
4. What effect did the threat of death in wartime have on you?
5. Were you ever so sick that you thought you might die?
6. What have been the close calls with death? Have your ideas about your own death changed over the years? How do you feel about your death now?
7. How have you grieved?
8. Do dead parents, grandparents, spouses, or others continue to have an effect on your life?
10. Have you ever killed anyone? How did you feel about it at the time? How do you feel about it now?
11. Did some great person’s death have an effect on you?
12. Is death an enemy or friend for you? Is it to be dreaded and fought, or welcomed?
13. What kind of death would you like to have?
14. If you could talk to a dead person, what would you ask him or her?
15. What was the most significant death you have experienced? How did it change you or your life?

Source:

Theme Assignment: The Meaning of Your Life, Your Aspirations and Life Goals

Questions of meaning, values, morality, and spirituality are often elusive and difficult to articulate. Human life is characterized by moral complexity and ambiguity. Often the black and white of childhood, the simple delineation of right and wrong, changes to a large area of grey in our adult lives. Questions of value and meaning, religion and morality, are often fraught with contradictions. Some people become moral gymnasts, stretching and bending with agility in the moral realm of life. Others find their home in a traditional religious philosophy and structure. Numerous people today have their own religion, an eclectic synthesis of many diverse elements. Still others avow atheism or agnosticism. Secular humanism claims a large following in contemporary culture.

How do your life goals fit into your beliefs and values? How have you set your life goals? What are they? Trace the history of your moral or religious development. How has it changed through your life? Do you have a philosophy of life? What is it? What does your life mean? What does human life in general mean?

Sensitizing Questions

1. What kinds of different goals do you have - material, social, personal, universal, moral, spiritual - and how important are they to you? Have your goals always been the same?
2. Were there any religious traditions in your home as a child? Have you carried them on? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever had a religious/spiritual experience? What were you doing and where did it happen? How did you react?
4. What symbols, either religious or secular, are significant for you? Why?
5. What are the principles that guide your life? What are your standards? What does it mean if you do not live up to them?
6. What has been your purpose in life? Have you had more than one purpose? How has this purpose (or these purposes) changed?
7. Do you find meaning in the idea of social justice or posterity? How do you act on these ideas?
8. Do you want to emulate some great figure (e.g. Moses, Gandhi)? Who are your moral heroes? Have they changed over time?
9. Were you taught not to be cruel to animals so that you would not be cruel to people? What is your relationship to the natural world?
10. Have you ever found life meaningless? Did it fill you with despair? Did you come to some understanding?
11. Why be moral? Why be?

Appendix F

Life Review Group Introductory & Closing Activities
Life Review Group Introductory Activity

The introductory activity for the initial group session of the Personal Development through Life Review program follows that recommended by Birren & Deutchman (1991). Group members are asked to describe themselves as animals and to use this metaphor to explore the differences between the real, ideal, and social self. The following steps taken from Birren & Deutchman (p. 87) are the steps in this activity:

1. Ask the group: “What animal do you most resemble, not only in physical appearance, but in affect, style, and status?”
2. Once each member has responded, you then ask: “What kind of animal do you think your friends and family would say you resemble?” Again, allow the group to respond and provide an opportunity for a brief discussion of the possible reasons for differences in perception.
3. Next ask: “What animal would you most like to resemble?” After each group member responds, you explore what changes would have to be made in order to resemble the ideal “animal” and whether these changes are viewed as possible or even favorable.

A debrief of this activity includes a discussion of the construction of identity which is assumed to include the real, ideal and social self (see diagram on following page). Again as described in Birren & Deutchman (pp. 10 & 11), in theory each of us bases our identity on analyses of the differences between three aspects of the self: (1) The real self as defined by our interpretation of who we really are (2) The ideal self, a model of what we would like to be or the “perfect self”, and (3) The social image self, our perception of how others view us. It is believed that our self-esteem arises for the perceived difference between the real and ideal self, and self-efficacy (feelings of competency) by the congruency between the social and ideal self. The greatest degree of self-actualization, or satisfaction with who we are and what we can accomplish, is determined by the difference amongst these three aspects of self. A large difference among the three aspects creates tension and anxiety while a high degree of similarly brings contentment and security in relation to others. Life review allows us to openly compare and thereby reduce the difference among the three aspects of self.

Life Review Group Closing Activity

The closing activity for the Life Review group experience consists of a “go around” with each group member taking time to tell each other group member in turn what they appreciate and value about that person.
METAPHORS AND TRIANGULATION OF THE SELF

Source: