

Addressing Faith in the Counselling Room:
A Phenomenological Exploration of Lived Experience

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Abstract

Since a large percentage of the world's population identifies with some sort of religious practice, I believe that as counsellors we need to feel comfortable and competent working not only with those from diverse ethnic or cultural backgrounds, but also with those who adhere to particular faith traditions. The purpose of the research presented in this thesis was to look at the lived experiences of five participants who were counselled by both a non-faith-based counsellor and a faith-based counsellor. My study was conducted using a phenomenological method of inquiry. After gathering my data, I identified four themes that arose from commonalities in the participants' responses and that, independently and in intersection with each other, seemed to capture the essence of their lived experiences. The themes represent the participants' insights into the importance of the spiritual aspect of human life, the client's need to be heard and understood, the paramount role of safety in the therapeutic conversation, and the need for suitable training and sensitivity on the part of the counsellor who works with faith-based clients. This researches indicates that counsellors examine their assumptions and biases when faced with issues related to religion. Suggestions are made as to how counsellors might use spiritual values to help their clients during periods of transition and growth.

Dedication

To my mother, a woman of boundless curiosity and a lifelong learner.

“I know for certain that we never lose the people we love, even to death. They continue to participate in every act, thought and decision we make. Their love leaves an indelible imprint in our memories. We find comfort in knowing that our lives have been enriched by having shared their love.”

Leo Buscaglia

To my husband, for his unwavering support and for inspiring me to be the best version of who I can be.

To my daughters, Emma and J. J., for their patience and support, and for the privilege of being co-students with them.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

“If you bring forth that which is within you

Then that which is within you

Will be your salvation.

If you do not bring forth that which is within you,

Then that which is within you

Will destroy you.”

Gospel of Thomas

Writing this master’s thesis marks the end of an academic era for me, but it also marks the beginning of a new journey. For years, as a registered nurse, I was passionate about helping people heal physically, but I was also interested in helping them gain a sense of healing on a more holistic level. My most rewarding moments came when my patients achieved some healing or peace that was not only physical but emotional and spiritual as well. Looking at an individual on all these levels was not always within the scope of my practice as a nurse. My most significant encounters often happened at the bedsides of those suffering emotionally or coming to terms with a grave diagnosis. At such times the deeper questions of life and death often presented themselves. As a nurse, I did what I could to be a personal presence, to attend to what was lodged deep within the sacred dimensions of my clients’ lives. Hence, I took whatever opportunities I could to train in areas that could equip me to help others explore their inner depths and to nurture their spirits. Helping those who die or suffer come to a place of peace, to acknowledge God as they understood him or her, to enter into a ritual which might involve

praying or singing, to provide comfort—these were things I felt equipped to do, gifts I could offer.

Years later, as I navigated the terrain of my own quest to find meaning and purpose, I embarked on a master's degree program that could give me the specific skills to work with people who were seeking help in their mental and emotional healing. This educational experience has been a blessing for which I am deeply grateful, and I look forward to what the future holds for me in the work of a counsellor.

However, a curiosity remains. A worldview that is informed by a specific set of spiritual values was bestowed upon me as part of my heritage, culture, and ethnicity. For me, creating meaning refers not only to making sense of the world on a cognitive and existential level, but also to being sensitive to how others make meaning in their lives. I think that having worked through some of life's existential questions—and having examined how narratives, including narratives based in religion and faith, have influenced my thinking and shaped my life—makes me a more effective counsellor. Authors and Doctors Richards and Bergin (2005), in their book written to aid practitioners augment their secular training (regardless of theoretical orientation), observed that the training therapists receive seldom reaches beyond secular viewpoints to address their experience in sacred or spiritual dimensions, thus creating a barrier to working with religious clients. Hence, I have chosen to focus my research on how faith-based clients experience counselling when the problems they present with involve the spiritual side of their lives.

Purpose of This Study

This study addresses the lived experience of clients who seek a faith-based perspective as one component of their counselling process. My research question is this: What is the

experience of clients who ask counsellors to help them process their concerns in the light of spiritual or religious themes, and does this experience differ in faith-based counselling as compared with secular counselling?

“Lived experience is to the soul as breath is to the body.”

M. van Manen (2014)

Background and Rationale of the Study

At times in my life I have been helped by talking to a therapist. As I look back on those times, I remember feeling disenchanted and somewhat curious about the way counsellors would address the questions or concerns I presented. My experience in therapy left me wondering how I, as a counsellor, would address issues of faith or spirituality in the counselling room. My experience as a nurse, and as a parish nurse, has put me in the position of hearing people's stories. Many of those suffering psychological distress have a distrust of secular counselling or have felt that their counsellors were ill-prepared to integrate their spiritual concerns into their therapy.

Seventy-five percent of the world's population identifies with some sort of religious practice (Leighton, 2016, p. 350). Since counsellors need to be competent in working with clients of diverse cultural backgrounds, the intersection of faith and counselling is a topic that demands our attention. An interdisciplinary study, that surveyed directors in clinical training regarding the import of religion in counselling programs, found that few graduate programs cover topics of spirituality and religion, even though professionals agree that they should be included as part of multicultural training (Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, & DeFanti, 2006, p. 1). Psychologist and

authors Priester et al. (2008) who, with contributing authors, authored a handbook for developing competencies in multi-cultural counselling, noted that only 35% of the syllabi of multicultural classes in graduate counselling programs explicitly address religion. Historically, there has been a neglect of spiritual diversity as part of the requirements for developing multicultural competencies in graduate programs. A Gallop poll in the United States found that two-thirds of those seeing a therapist for serious problems would prefer to see a therapist who affirms spiritual values and beliefs (Hage et al., 2006, p. 218).

With these considerations in mind, I come to this thesis project reflecting on my own experience and assumptions, recognizing my own biases and values, and at the same time hoping to conduct the research proposed here in a consistent way. The purpose of this study is to explore what clients experience when they wish to discuss their personal concerns in a manner that is informed by their faith or spirituality. As counsellors, we are in the business of helping people. Clients come to us in hope of gaining a clear view of their situation and prospects, and by acting as a mirror we attempt to reflect and describe what they tell us.

Phenomenology is a method of inquiry well suited to the investigation of the counselling experience. Phenomenology is the study of the “lifeworld” human beings inhabit (van Manen, 2015, p. 9). Instead of trying to conceptualize or pigeonhole life experiences, the phenomenologist reflects on her own or someone else’s experience and attempts to understand it more deeply. As counsellors, instead of trying to explain our clients’ suffering, let us offer insightful descriptions of how they experience that suffering. British author and psychotherapist, David Brazier, (n.d.) notes that science typically looks at that which is measurable and objective and points out that in counselling no perception is objective. How can one measure one’s experience? (para. 3). Brazier provides a poignant example of phenomenology as an inquiry into

the perceptions of others and of how new meanings arise in the process of such inquiry. In Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, the protagonist and his rationalist friend Horatio have seen an apparition. Hamlet demonstrates phenomenological thinking in his response: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (Shakespeare, cited in Brazier, n.d., para. 3). As counsellors, we too are challenged to approach phenomena with a "fresh, open and welcoming mind, as coming upon something new, wonderful and strange" (para. 4). I hope that as a counsellor I will approach what is familiar with the same curiosity as I do what is unfamiliar. What happens when as counsellors we enter into dialogue with persons whose views we do not necessarily understand? Dr. Trent Leighton, professor at the University of Lethbridge, in his research on how religion might be addressed in counselling programs, suggests that counsellors, need to be open to exploration of whatever lifeworld the client is immersed in (Leighton, 2016). Perhaps, if counsellors can better understand the beliefs that support people in coping with their problems, and be curious as to where those beliefs came from and how clients came to hold them, it will be possible to better understand the narratives that inform their life experiences.

Other Considerations

When counsellors enter into conversations concerning faith and spirituality, they are challenged to examine prior assumptions about such topics. The ways in which clients experience, express, and understand their beliefs are wonderfully diverse, as are the ways they make meaning with the aid of their belief systems. It has been my experience that there is general mistrust of, or skepticism about, the representation of topics of faith or spirituality in the counselling room. The unspoken conceptual underpinnings of Western psychotherapy seem to suggest that therapy happens in a secular space. Leighton (2016) expresses the need for

“religious literacy” that would help counsellors work effectively with their clients (p. 351). He challenges counsellors to understand religion as an activity rather than an object, noting that religions can be located along a “sliding scale of expression and translation” (p. 350). For example, when a student places herself along the continuum in reference to the Buddhist tenets of “suffering, phenomenal emptiness, and enlightenment,” her understanding of the difference between theory and application will be illuminated by the way she then engages and interprets these tenets. Interpretations will vary, however, because the way the student engages in this exercise will reflect a broad range of teachings and practices, “not a fixed pedagogical point” (p. 350). Informed by such reflections, the counsellor (or counselling trainee) begins to understand the psychological dilemma or realities a faith-based client may be faced with in trying to observe the teachings and practices of her faith tradition in her own way.

Ethical Considerations

Addressing topics of faith and spirituality can be an undertaking laden with assumptions, anxiety, and potential ethical dilemmas. The ethical codes formulated by our professional organizations are helpful, but these codes are never entirely comprehensive; in particular, they do not provide the counsellor with guidelines for working with faith-based clients. For example, Researchers Scott, Sheperis, Simmons, Rush-Wilson, & Milo (2016), in the clinical training of doctoral students, point to the code of ethics of the American Counseling Association (2014) which includes the word *religion*, but not the word *faith*, in its statement of standards of practice. For some clients these terms are synonymous, but for others their meanings differ (p. 194). Wyatt (2004) points to this difference in his doctoral work on narrative and life story research. He suggests that terms such as religious faith and spirituality are often contested. For him, religion is organized and involves community. He defines spirituality, however, as having a

much broader definition (p. 29) as it is more personal and can have unlimited subtleties and manifestations (2004). Exploring the values that give meaning to a client’s faith or belief system, and how those values intersect with a presenting problem, demands ethical care on the part of the counsellor. This can pose a dilemma for the counsellor when a client’s religious beliefs might conflict with the counsellor’s knowledge of evidenced-based best-practice interventions. The scholarly literature reflects a tension between counsellors’ own understanding of spiritual values or beliefs and the effects of that understanding on their clients when faith-related conversations arise in the counselling room. Scott et al. (2016) suggest that “counsellors are presented with unique challenges when faith is a prominent clinical variable” (p. 193). These authors regard faith as a cultural variable that intersects with psychology, one’s culture, and ultimately one’s psychosocial well-being, arguing that faith should be taken into consideration when providing ethical care and when constructing models of ethical decision making. Doing so places counsellors under a mantle of responsibility, for it obliges them to address their own uncertainties about how they can safely address the uniqueness and dignity of all people, and to question the worldview that shapes their ideas and actions.

Professional organizations in North America have acknowledged that counsellors must be aware of religious diversity in order to practice ethically. The American Counseling Association (2014), in section A.1d of its *Code of Ethics*, acknowledges the importance of counsellors’ recognizing how various religious or spiritual support networks and resources hold meaning for people and how their clients might access such supports. The Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) (2007), in section A. 10 of its *Code of Ethics*, mandates that the counsellor be sensitive to factors of diversity, including religion, when providing ethical care. In 2006, the CCPA established a Spirituality in Counselling Chapter, whose mission is to provide

ongoing professional development for counsellors with regard to addressing the sacred dimensions of the lives of their clients and taking these dimensions into account when providing interventions or conversations that contribute to their well-being (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, 2019).

Scott et al. (2016) researched accredited counselling programs and found that some offer stand-alone ethics courses while others incorporate ethical study throughout the curriculum (p. 200). In either case, much attention is given to topics such as how to address diverse sexual practices, infidelity, gender, race, and other factors related to culture and diversity (p. 201). However, there appears to be a reluctance to consider faith or religion as independent variables in counselling; somehow, a counsellor is seen as compromising or violating ethical codes when using spiritually based interventions, given that these professions are driven by evidence based research that is firmly embedded in science. Subsequently, spiritual distress or care of the soul is considered the domain of pastoral care or clergy. However, my experience as both nurse and counsellor strongly suggests that if a therapist's education and training do not address the religious or spiritual domains, he or she will be ill-equipped to address them in practice in a manner that would be both clinically effective and ethical. One might argue that a counsellor would be negligent if he or she failed to understand the role of belief systems in human development and in counselling. Some counsellors may assume that adhering to a particular faith tradition or working with clients who do would hamper their ability to take a constructivist approach to counselling. Distinguished professor of counselling at Sam Houston University, Watts (2011) asserts, however, that "how one knows, understands, and makes meaning is strongly contextual. Again, one sees this in both religious traditions and psychological theories. Persons embracing various traditions and theories are part of communities of meaning" (p. 3).

The importance of religious faith is underappreciated in psychotherapy, among both students and practicing counsellors. Aservic (2009, as cited in Scott et al., 2016) found deficits in graduate students' abilities to "conceptualize the client within the framework of his or her beliefs and to fully understand the impact of these beliefs on psychosocial functioning" (p. 201). Wyatt (2004) reports some comments made by faith-based therapists who provide spiritual interventions. One seemed embarrassed when asked about this, as she feared being seen as "unprofessional" or as "behaving unethically" (p. 40). Other counsellors commented on how they struggled to reconcile the demands of professional integrity with those of their client's faith identity. The nature of a client's religious values could, possibly, conflict with both the counsellor's therapeutic method and personal views (p. 37). Therefore, it is essential that research and training programs continue to examine the intersection of religion and psychology in the counselling room so that we as counsellors may become intentional in attending to clients' spiritual needs, promoting wholeness and helping them make sense of their experience, whatever their beliefs and perspectives.

Situating the Researcher

Counselling is a practice that involves working with others in the context of their lives and their values. To understand what that means I need to be clear about my own privilege, about my personal story, and about what I believe. I became a nurse in my early twenties because I never really understood there to be other options, except to become a teacher or (like most female high-school graduates) to get married. I grew up in a small community in southern Manitoba in which the dominant religion, Christianity, was practiced within the context of a Mennonite ethnicity. People were hard-working and earnest; to "serve others" was considered among the highest of values. Beliefs were passed on and rarely questioned. If one had the

privilege of higher education, the discourse of questioning began but was not necessarily embraced. I was fortunate enough to have parents who taught me to think for myself and exposed me to experiences which led me to widen my world view. Sometimes, as life's challenges presented themselves, I struggled with the incongruencies between what I believed and what I experienced as I moved forward with my own interpretations and understandings, trying to integrate my faith into my lifeworld.

Various forms of mental illness, including depression, have beset my family for at least three generations before my own. One could posit intergenerational trauma, war, and dislocation as contributing factors. My experience, too, has been to suffer depression at various points in my life. When in need of help I sought counselling to help me reconcile my personal issues with the faith in which I was raised, trying to understand how that fit into my cultural context. This experience was fraught with disappointment. When I was finally able to enter into a conversation that helped me navigate my experience and make meaning out of it, however, I felt truly liberated.

Throughout my nursing career, and now as I embark on a new way of helping people, I continue to strive to meet others where they are, to be respectful of what has informed their stories, and mostly to remember to make space for more than one perspective. My hope in undertaking my thesis project is help ensure that we as counsellors will be open to helping others whose challenges are faith-based in nature. I believe we must consider our own context, including the "history, beliefs, prejudices, and predispositions" that can influence how we interpret someone's else lived experience (Finlay, 2011, p. 112). Psychotherapist, author and editor L. Finlay (2011) argues that in phenomenological research we cannot help but bring ourselves into the research, and that our particular manner of experiencing the world cannot be

separated from that which we are attempting to understand (p. 113). As a researcher, therefore, I need to be cognizant of my biases and how they influence the research process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

“As we work to create light for others, we naturally light our own way.”

MaryAnne Radmacher

In view of the sparseness of previous research on the intersection of faith and counselling, we know little about what clients think and feel when their faith is a significant component of the issues they wish to address in a counselling setting. Current literature offers little help to counsellors who might need to know how religion might be used to support their clients; indeed, it often suggests a degree of tension between one’s professional integrity and the use of spiritual interventions (Evans & Devlin, 2016; Worthington, 1989; Parker, 2011; Dyer & Hagedorn, 2013; Leighton, 2016; Wyatt, 2002, 2004). Perhaps most revealing is a study in which databases of the American Counseling Association were searched over a ten-year period (2003–2013) for peer-reviewed articles exploring the significance of spirituality, faith, and religion to persons suffering grief and loss (Dyer & Hagedorn, 2013): only six such studies were identified (p. 69). Clients present to counsellors when distressed, or in response to grief and loss. The authors posit that in these circumstances, clients often connect to their spiritual values or faith traditions. They argue that a counsellor needs to feel prepared in attending to these clients. It is concerning, therefore, that so little research addresses the use of spiritually based interventions, even at a time when clients are asking for such interventions. As a counsellor in training, I am curious about how neglected a topic this remains, given that empirical research suggests that “spiritually related coping mechanisms,” such as prayer, meditation, and religious services or

rituals, have been correlated with successful treatment of a variety of mental-health problems (Dyer & Hagedorn, 2013, p. 70).

In another small qualitative study, Wyatt (2004) found that “religious faith was, at times, a significant feature of clinical discourse, one that could evoke anxiety in the counsellor” (p. 24). Discomfort with religious issues is considered in a study by Smith (2004) that addresses issues of faith, spirituality, and religion in the context of professional competencies. She asserts that the lack of attention to religion at the level of higher education has left professionals unprepared to deal with the subject when it arises in their practice (p. 208). As Richards and Bergin (2005) explain, “Because of the alienation that has existed historically between the behavioral sciences and religion, the spiritual concerns of clients have long been neglected in the psychotherapy profession” (p. 6). Leighton (2016) describes the outcome of the contentious relationship between psychology and religion as a “muzzling of the faith” (p. 348). Part of the responsibility for this wariness when considering the import of religion in the work of healing minds may be attributed to Freud (1856–1939). He equated religion with irrationality and superstition. Considering its role in the development of society, Freud held that some less mature individuals need religious rules to live by, whereas mature people are guided by reason. According to Smith (n.d.), he considered the fact that “religion persists into the present day [to be] a sign of human illness,” more specifically an obsessional neurosis. Leighton (2016), on the other hand, argues that Freud’s views may be misunderstood. His question, “Wherein lies the peculiar value of religious ideals?” suggests that he formulated his system without being therapeutically engaged in conversations of a spiritual nature (p. 349). The neo-Freudian psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm (1900–1980) “noted that every human being is innately religious in the wider sense

of not being able to extract oneself from systems of meaning while also remaining sane” (Leighton, 2016, p. 349).

Growing evidence suggests that people seek out ways to give meaning to their lives and that this often includes a consideration of religious or spiritual values (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005, p. 461; Dyer & Hagedorn, 2013). In my experience, I have been presented with those who seek support in therapy not only when they have trouble living out their religious values, but also when they needed support in seeing how those same values can point toward solutions to their problems. There are multiple ways in which counsellors can help faith-based clients navigate challenges in the counselling room; to do so, however, they must be adequately trained and open to exploring how religion and spirituality inform their client’s worldviews (Scott et al., 2016).

Leighton (2016) refers to the tendency for instructors in the classroom to address religious beliefs only as a “therapeutic afterthought” (p. 349). Once again this points to the lack of training that would prepare counsellors to address areas outside their own typically secular views, specifically spiritual concerns (p. 6). Richards and Bergin (2005), on the other hand, note that graduate counselling programs are beginning to include such training as part of their effort to accommodate diversity, pointing to research that suggests therapy can be more successful if religious issues are addressed sensitively along with other concerns. Hage et al. (2006) argue that counsellors need to understand their own religious and cultural views, the better to understand those of their clients in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse and pluralistic.

Multicultural competence includes recognizing how not only racial and cultural identity, but also religious identity, shapes a client’s life; for some cultures “spiritual and religious affiliation is a more potent social glue than the color of one’s skin, cultural heritage, or gender” (p. 218).

An inspiring doctoral study out of the United Kingdom by Greenidge and Baker (2012) examined the counselling experience of Christian clients. They looked at the experiences of Christian clients of both faith-based and non-faith-based counsellors. While stressing that more research into this topic is needed, they found that the therapeutic alliance between a counsellor and client should not be minimized, however those clients who identify as Christian, choosing a Christian counsellor “does not only avoid a potential dilemma but maximizes success” (p. 219). It would be presumptuous to suggest that a non-faith-based counsellor would be threatening to a Christian client. Nonetheless, when clients reveal their innermost thoughts regarding their faith or spirituality, when they bring up problems they have encountered in coping with their belief system, they need to know they can do so without the fear of being judged, dissuaded, discriminated against, or perhaps even pathologized.

Although there are no universally accepted definitions of some of the key terms used in this thesis—notably, “spirituality,” “faith,” and “religion”—those provided by Oxford Living Dictionaries (2017) will suffice for present purposes:

Spirituality: “The quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things.” Also, “a sense of a relationship with or belief in a higher power or entity greater than oneself that involves a search for wholeness and harmony” (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009, p. 62).

Faith: “Complete trust or confidence in someone or something or strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof.” Also, “a way of knowing one’s place in the world; meaning making” (Parker, 2011, p. 113).

Religion: “The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods.” Also, “cultural expressions of faith and spirituality” (Parker, 2011, p. 112).

The above definitions are not all-encompassing, and part of the challenge presented to the counsellor is to be aware of how these terms are understood in the professional and counselling context, especially their use in or application to clinical situations (Scott et al., 2016). Improved insight into the therapeutic importance of religious values held by clients is needed. Worthington (1989) distinguishes between “intrinsic [and] extrinsic religiosity”—that is, between religion pursued for its own sake and the religion into which a person was born (p. 597). Unless this distinction is maintained, a dilemma may occur for counsellors who ask, as Worthington does, “What is beneficial or helpful in therapy?” Worthington adds that “more widely accepted instruments [are required] to measure one’s development of faith in their lives” (p. 598). For the purposes of my proposed research, it may be important to note that clients who state that they are spiritual do not necessarily mean that they are religious or adhere to a faith orientation.

Chapter 3: Methodology

“Only when our entire culture for the first time saw itself threatened by radical doubt and critique did hermeneutics become a matter of universal significance”

Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1983, p. 100

A Qualitative Approach Using Phenomenology as a Method of Inquiry

In beginning the work on this thesis, I reflected on my own encounters as a client in counselling. My experience was not something that could be measured or quantified. My own lived experience was the impetus for my inquiry; therefore, a phenomenological approach resonated with me.

University of Calgary psychologist and professor, Susann Laverty, discusses that in the 1980s there was a sense of disillusionment with the limitations of logical-empirical research (Laverty, 2003). Interest in qualitative methodologies increased, leading to an inquiry into “discovery, description and meaning rather than prediction, control and measurement” (Laverty, 2003, p. 21). The German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was disenchanted by the way psychology applied methods of natural science to human beings. Phenomenology was developed by Husserl in the aftermath of the First World War, in response to a “disintegrating civilization,” as a philosophical method that would restore certainty and absolutes (Groenewald, 2004, p. 3). Husserl challenged the current thinking of the time with his motto, “zu den Sachen selbst,” which Dowling (2007) interprets as “let’s get down to what matters” (p. 2).

Author J. Creswell (2014), renowned for work in qualitative inquiry, states that the qualitative approach to research allows for “exploring and understanding the meaning

individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). This approach focuses on individual meaning, so that “the inquirer is typically involved in sustained and intensive experience with participants” (p. 187). Phenomenology, as an approach to qualitative research, tries to uncover a participant’s lived experience. German was my first language; hence, I take comfort in the German words in which Husserl and others describe the phenomenological approach. Words in one language cannot always be translated into another without losing some of their meaning or effect. Max van Manen, a Dutch- born Canadian scholar specializing in phenomenological research methods, (2015) states, “we recognize differentiated possibilities of meaning that adhere to the socio-cultural context to which a given language belongs (p. xiii).

A term heard often in phenomenology is “lived experience.” Lived experience is the “starting point and end point of phenomenological research” (van Manen, 2015, p. 36). “Lived experiences gather hermeneutic significance as we (reflectively) gather them by giving memory to them” (p. 37). Van Manen (2015) distinguishes between “lived experiences” and “life experiences” in that life experience (*Erfahrung* in German) is more “inclusive,” being an “accumulation [of] the understandings and sense we may have made of [our] experiences” (p. 177). These experiences can have a “transformative effect on our being” (p. 177). Lived experience (*Erlebnis* in German), refers to “experience as we live it” (p. 177).

In approaching this study, I considered several other frameworks but ultimately chose hermeneutic phenomenology as an explorative approach suited to my research. According to Creswell (2014), the phenomenological researcher combines “philosophy and psychology” as he or she “describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 14). The researcher asks not only why or how these experiences occurred but also what is their true nature, their meaning or “essence,” what it was like to have lived through

them (van Manen, 2015, p. 10). Reflection becomes “retrospective,” since the individuals reflect on something that has “passed or been lived through” (p. 10).

Being personally invested in the subject matter of this study, I am acutely aware of how my own background in the phenomena of interest has shaped how I interpreted data. My own faith-based experiences give me a keen interest in how others make sense of theirs (cf. Creswell, 2014, p. 8). My hope is that the reader of my study will gain a clear sense of how clients experience the phenomena of faith in relation to counselling.

A hermeneutical (i.e., interpretive) phenomenological approach, based on the work of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), aims to investigate the common features of participants’ experiences by combining the “descriptive” process of attentive listening and the “interpretive” process of reconstructing the lived experience of those interviewed (van Manen, 2014, p. 180). Heidegger, who worked alongside Husserl, eventually departed somewhat from Husserlian thinking in that he was concerned with the life experience and how it was lived, aiming to “illuminat[e] details “and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding” (Lavery, 2003, p. 23). Heidegger used the German word *Dasein* to designate the “mode of being human” or “the situated meaning of the human in the world” (p. 24). Husserl, on the other hand, focused on “understanding beings or phenomena” while “identifying and suspending our assumptions (‘bracketing’ off culture, context, history, etc.) in order to get at the universal essence of a given phenomenon, as it presents itself to consciousness.” His phenomenology aimed to *transcend* our everyday assumptions (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 102).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

A specific qualitative approach to research is that of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Interpretative phenomenology employs a double hermeneutic, a double loop of interpretation, in which the subject interprets his or her experience and the researcher interprets that interpretation. The “interpretive” or “hermeneutical” approach (for the purposes of this study, these two terms are used synonymously) is strengthened by the way in which it invites the researcher to engage in a “process of self-reflection” (Lavery, 2003, p. 3), thus prompting me to consider how my experience relates to what I am researching. Unlike a more purely phenomenological approach, IPA allows the researcher to embed their own assumptions which in turn are essential to the interpretative process.

Heidegger felt strongly that “every encounter involves an interpretation influenced by a person’s background or historicity” (Lavery, 2003, p. 24). For me, to understand a phenomenon is to make meaning of it, and that process is informed and constructed by my culture, my faith, and the community in which I formed my beliefs. Van Manen (2015) states that there are no such things as “uninterpreted phenomena” (p. 180). The IPA approach allows findings to emerge while taking great care not to delete or distort that which is provided in the original transcripts of the participants’ conversations.

I have in this study, identified and analyzed the tension, if any, that is experienced when spiritual issues arose in the counselling room. How do clients experience discussing their spiritual concerns with counsellors, and what are the implications for both clients and counsellors when the client’s needs are not met or understood? The beauty of such an approach is the way it gives meaning to inquiry (van Manen, 2015, p. 28). Differing from the conventional scientific method that quantifies and objectifies its object, dealing with it only in terms of “analytic concepts,” phenomenology seeks instead to capture the “phenomenality of the human

experience” (p. 27). This can feel risky. How does one accurately assess one’s lived experience? What sets phenomenology apart from other modes of inquiry is that it wants to “investigate the ordinary emergences of human experiences and meanings” (van Manen, 2014, p. 55). IPA illuminates details of “seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding” (Laverty, 2002, p. 24). This resonates deeply with me as a counsellor. I appreciate the words of my thesis supervisor: “Phenomenology requires the researcher to move beyond ordinary thinking, and although that is a skill that is used in counselling, I wanted to know how I might do that in [my research]” (Breiddal, 2014).

As mentioned earlier, the focus of a phenomenological study is to uncover and interpret the inner essence of the participants’ cognitive processing regarding some experience. Thus the final product of a phenomenological inquiry is a description that presents the essence of the phenomenon. A reader of a phenomenological study should have a strong sense that “now I understand what it is like to have experienced that particular phenomenon” (Worthington, n.d., n.p.).

IPA is not only interested in how people make sense of their experience but also “requires the researcher to collect detailed, reflective, first-person accounts from research participants” (Larkin & Thompson, 2011, p. 103). Larkin and Thompson (2011) posit that “giving voice” to the participants and “making sense” of their accounts are the requisites of a successful study (p. 101). In doing so, I considered carefully how I can meet these two requirements. Authors and professors of clinical doctrinal training, Larkin & Thompson (2011), suggest that IPA is an interpretative (hermeneutical) phenomenological epistemology that is concerned with the way people relate to the world and the meanings they make of their

experiences. By using IPA, the researcher takes an active role in the research (p.102). Smith and Osborne (2009) suggest that in doing so “a double hermeneutic is involved”: “the participants [are] trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (p. 53). Furthermore, IPA, consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology, wants to “understand what it is like, from the point of view of the participants, to take their side” (p. 54). In doing so I was aware of the need to be cognizant of how I ask questions. What was the participant trying to convey to me? Did anything emerging in the conversation that the participant may not be aware of? (Osborne, 2007, p. 53). As in other qualitative approaches, “IPA is concerned with meaning and processes, rather than with events and their causes” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 102). In this way the researcher is able to look at how the participant makes meaning of an experience (p. 102). IPA is also interested in how the participant’s making of meaning relates to the world in which he or she lives. It assumes that what matters most is the experience or the claims made by that person (participant) being studied; how is the “phenomenon been understood by that person” (Larkin, Watts & Cliftin, 2011, p. 117). Furthermore, it suggests that the researcher too should have a clear sense of how they “identify and reflect upon their own experiences and assumptions” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 103). According to Finlay (2011), researchers in phenomenology understand that what participants say about their experience “is their truth” (p. 77); with non-judgmental acceptance, the researchers acknowledge that the participants’ reality comes from their exploration within the context of their socio-cultural background and accept the resulting diversity. As Finlay suggests, we must “pay close attention to our participants through curiosity, empathy and compassion” (p. 78).

I am cognizant of the challenges that are inherent in the process of laying aside my own truth or assumptions or even prejudices as I delve deeply into a participant's lived experience. As mentioned earlier there are many approaches to phenomenology with hermeneutic or interpretative as the most commonly used methods in guiding research (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013, p. 1). Husserl introduces the concept of bracketing as a way to phenomenological inquiry and of exploring human experience" (p. 1). Bracketing is meant to demonstrate validity and, in doing so, encourages the researchers to put aside their own "knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences in order to accurately describe participants' life experiences" (p. 2). Knowing what to bracket involves discernment, and therefore I am careful to set aside "scientific theories," "knowledge," "truth or falsity claims," and my "personal view and experiences" (Finlay, 2011, p. 76).

Fusion of Horizons

In contrast to a Husserlian approach to research, which would advocate putting aside one's preconceptions to reduce their impact on the interpretation of the data, hermeneutic phenomenology and the work of Heidegger recognize that the researcher's prior understanding of a phenomenon cannot be eliminated or "bracketed." As the researcher my own understanding and experiences would be difficult to set aside in order to fully describe the participants' experiences (cf. Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). This aligns with Heidegger, who although rooted in German philosophy like Husserl, began his career in theology (Lavery, 2003). He departed from his contemporary Husserl in his views on "pre-understandings." He believed that these pre-understandings cannot be put aside and that those understandings are already here with us in the world (p. 24). "Meaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experience" (Lavery, 2003, p. 24).

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his account of “fusions of horizons,” argues that resolution in dialogue is important. He believes dialogue to be successful if it ends in a mutual agreement (Vessey, 2009). Philosophy professor David Vessey (2009) defines Gadamer’s concept of the horizon as follows: “the horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular standpoint” (p. 538). Both the interpreter and the text (representative of the other) have a horizon. It is in the fusion of horizons that the subject-object dichotomy is transcended (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Something old and something new emerge through interpreting a text and subsequently transforms the researcher’s previous understanding. This continues to develop and he or she begins to incorporate the new understanding into the process. According to Vessey (2009) Gadamer thought we cannot understand a philosophical text without understanding how it can be a bearer of insights for us. When the interpreter moves or changes position through developing understanding, his or her horizon moves as well. Fusion of horizons implies that the “horizon of the interpreter comes to encompass or integrate the discerned horizon of the text” (p. 539). In the process, “[fore-] understanding is changed until it is able to account for the sense of the text. [Fore-] understanding becomes understanding” (Arnold & Fischer, 1994, p. 64).

Procedure and Participants

Professor Joan Sargeant (2012) from Dalhousie remarks, “Subject selection in qualitative research is purposeful; participants are selected who can best inform the research questions and enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study” (p. 5). Following ethical approval, I was able to contact directors at various counselling agencies to obtain their cooperation in my study, after which I followed up with an organizational consent form. When permission was granted, I dropped off recruitment letters to offices in hope of recruiting participants (see Appendix E).

Each had sought and received counselling in periods of six weeks to two years from two professionally qualified counsellors, one who identified as a faith-based counsellor, the other a non-faith based counsellor. In addition, a few individuals who heard about my study asked if they could participate. Once preliminary recruitment was accomplished, I followed up with an e-mail thanking the participants for their interest in the study. The five participants who were selected were all Caucasian and included four women and one man. Ages ranged from 35 to 58. Most were working and/or held professional qualifications.

Upon further consideration and subsequent approval from the International Review Board (IRB), I refined my method of collecting data. I opted to use the online tool Survey Monkey to ask the questions detailed in Appendix A. Before collecting the data, I obtained a signed CityU Research Participant Informed Consent form from each participant (see Appendix C). The process included developing the survey instrument, creating a URL link to the survey, emailing the link to the participants, receiving the results through the Survey Monkey website, and transferring the data to a file for analysis. Survey Monkey provides respondents with confidentiality and anonymity subject to privacy use under use of terms. The site also allows only one response from any given IP address, which reduces the chances of multiple contributions to the study by one respondent, which could possibly skew the results. Larkin and Thompson (2012) remind us that IPA focuses on exploring meanings and elucidating narratives that are “rich, detailed and reflective” (p.104); therefore, ideal sample sizes in IPA-based research are small. Quality as opposed to quantity is what permits thoughtful analysis to occur (p. 104). The work of authors and researchers Elliott and Timulak (2005) persuaded me to use a survey format to collect my data:

Self-report questionnaires are used much less in qualitative research, because they typically do not stimulate the needed level of elaboration sought by the qualitative researcher. However, given time and space constraints, questionnaires may be used as well. In that case they naturally consist of open-ended questions and ask respondents for elaboration, examples, etc. (p. 150).

However, these authors suggest follow-up phone calls be used to give to respondents an opportunity to elaborate on certain points. Once again, I sought amendments to my proposal and received permission to follow up with participants (once I received the survey responses) with a personalized telephone conversation.

Data Collection

In developing the questionnaire, I was mindful of the need that the questions created directly reflect the topic and be of significance to the participants. Larkin and Thompson (2012) state that in IPA research the sample population is largely homogenous in that the recruited participants “tend to have *understanding* of the topic at hand” (p. 103). The participants have something of value to contribute because they have experience of the subject investigated or because it has particular relevance to their lives. I was surprised by the participant’s eagerness to be involved. It was as if they too were invested in this study and that their contribution might in some ways help others to address faith in the counselling room.

Following receipt of the signed permission and consent forms, a survey developed online through Survey Monkey was sent to the participants with questions pertaining to my research (see Appendix A). When doing so I identified myself as counselling practicum student. In the interest of self-disclosure and transparency, each participant was told that I personally adhered to

the Christian faith. This disclosure seemed to engender a greater openness to disclosing experiences.

Questions and answers exchanged in an hermeneutic perspective are unique in the way the researcher and participant work together to generate understanding from the responses and interpretations. The influential phenomenological researcher Giorgi (as cited in Bevan, 2014) states that “questions are generally broad and open ended so that the subject has sufficient opportunity to express his or her view point extensively” (p. 137). The approach to asking questions was “two-tiered,” in that it involved not only obtaining descriptions but also extracting the meaning from those experiences (Bevan, 2014).

As Laverly (2003) observes:

Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one’s own thinking on the subject. . . . To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were. (p. 375)

It follows then, that understanding is always more than re-creating someone else’s meaning.

Analysis

As the researcher, I was interested in the initial reflections of the person who has undergone this particular experience. The data was then interpreted and thematized in order to “...gain access to the thing experienced, its modes of appearing in natural attitude, and its meaning” (Bevan, 2014, p. 137). Van Manen (2017) encourages researchers to think about what the term “lived experience” really means for the researcher. How does one access or reflect on what it means to live through something? Van Manen also suggests that, as researchers, we avoid

“objectifying” meanings into “sanitized concepts” (p. 813). Qualitative research yields findings that can be measured through analysis and depicted in figures, visuals, or graphs (p. 814). These observations confirm my interest in phenomenology as a method of conducting my research. I aim to discover how meaning and meaningfulness are experienced, rather than merely to code information.

Engaging in IPA enables the researcher to gain insights from “personal experiences” and “psychosocial processes” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 114). These insights provide a view of how people make sense of events within their socio-cultural context: “They may not tell us what causes *x*, or whether *y* works—but they can help us to understand what it is like to live with *x*, and how *y* works” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 114). My hope in analyzing my data was to identify emergent themes. Van Manen (2017) states that the “purpose of reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something” (p. 76). I took time to reflect on the information I collected, looking for themes or patterns that emerged and the meanings that were attached to the information obtained. Finlay (2011) points to researchers’ ability to draw on ideas as they come forth, encouraging the researchers to “dwell “with the lived experience (p. 111). Such a phenomenology allows the researcher to interpret meanings that are “implicit or hidden” (p. 111).

IPA work is typically done through a semi-structured interview process in which the researchers should be creative and fluid as opposed to taking a “prescriptive approach” (Finlay, 2011, p. 142). It is recommended that researchers use a small sample size of three to six participants, which makes the analysis of their data manageable but at the same time allows for a detailed and rich account of the subject matter. Finlay (2011) provides the novice researcher like myself with seven helpful steps for analyzing data. They are as follows:

1. Reading, re-reading, and immersing oneself in the data
2. Initially noting and exploring semantic content
3. Looking for themes that are emerging
4. Searching for connections across the themes
5. Attempting to bracket themes arising from each participant in order to keep an open mind about each case
6. Looking for patterns across cases; finding patterns with shared qualities
7. Taking interpretations to a deeper level (p. 142)

Following Finlay's guidelines gave structure to my research and made the process manageable. Given my limited experience, I was concerned that I might find it difficult to avoid a reductionist analysis. Perhaps this stems from my science background which favors scientific rigour, but rather, my aim was to make sense of the participants' lived experiences through an analysis that provided "interpretations of a range of possible meanings as fitting the hermeneutic nature of phenomenology" (p. 147). Doing so can be complex, rich, messy and ambiguous (Finlay, 2011, p. 9).

As I began to delve deeper into my research, I struggled with how to engage in a truly phenomenological analysis. I felt overwhelmed. The more I read the literature, the more I wondered how I might capture the essence of my participants' experiences in terms of the meanings that emerged. I wondered how to co-create, "... through reflection and dialogue" (Finlay, 2011, p. 197). My time as a counselling practicum student had made me aware of how conversation progresses with fluidity, spontaneity, and some use of intuition (cf. Finlay, 2011, p. 199). As a counsellor in training I do to some extent guide or direct the conversation. However, in my research I needed to examine descriptions or responses to open-ended questions emailed to

the participants in a survey format. I needed to explore ways of reflecting on the words they used to describe their experiences, knowing I would lack the advantage of hearing their moment-by-moment accounts of those experiences. The challenge was to dwell with what I was given and probe for meanings that might emerge. I wondered how I could be curious, attentive, empathetic, and reflexive in this method of analyzing data. Without the actual nuances that happens in a face to face conversation, how could I create from the text what was needed to nurture this type of meaning? Furthermore, how could I, as a researcher committed to phenomenological analysis, open up for the reader a representation of the data in such a way as to ensure the that the participants' voices would be heard?

In looking at the data I aimed to dwell in, or linger over, descriptions and, since there is no established template for phenomenological research, I looked for ways to work with the textual data collected. Van Manen (2014) reminds the researcher that phenomenology is “more a method of questioning than answering” (p. 25). Looking at texts can make reflective questioning difficult; therefore, I was committed to being keenly aware of what Heidegger (2010) as cited in van Manen (2014) points to as *logos*, meaning “to let something be seen,” and of the fact that *phenomenon* means to let that what shows “itself in itself” (p. 26). The hermeneutic circle, derived from Heidegger’s work, and Gadamer’s work on the fusion of horizons are inextricably connected. As one goes through the cycle of study, reflection, and understanding, viewpoints change. It is like being on a Ferris wheel, but one that is not static but rather moves along a track (like the wheel of a train). With each rotation the view from the top changes. The horizon evolves. With each revolution comes evolution. Each cycle brings a new perspective and perhaps a deepening understanding between client and counsellor, or between researcher and participant.

In order to attribute meaning to the data collected in phenomenological research, van Manen (2015) encourages the use of three distinct methods of isolating thematic statements. In reviewing the responses that I received through the surveys, I noticed that some descriptions were richer than others, just as occurs in our everyday conversations (cf. van Manen, 2015, p. 92). My aim was to uncover thematic aspects, using all three of van Manen's suggested methods:

1. *The holistic-reading approach*, which tries to capture the significance of the text as a whole. I achieved this by ascertaining phrases that wholly encompassed common experiences.
2. *The selective-reading approach*, which involves reading a text several times and asking "which statement or phrase seems particularly essential or revealing about the experience being described." Using this method, I took central recurring phrases and highlighted them. This showed commonalities between the texts and hinted towards a theme.
3. *The detailed-reading approach*, which looks at what each sentence reveals about the experience being described. By comparing similar fragments within the context of the lived experience I was able to consolidate thematic material. (pp. 92-95).

Chapter 4: Findings

“You see, it’s never the environment; it’s never the events of our lives, but the meaning we attach to the events—how we interpret them—that shapes who we are today and who we’ll become tomorrow.”

Anthony Robbins

This chapter explores the major themes that emerge from the anecdotal data illustrated in the text boxes shown below. As van Manen (2015) states, participant responses such as those presented in Text Box 1 can often lead to confusion for the researcher; the responses may be “skimpy” or lack “sufficient concreteness” (p. 67). Having used a survey to collect my data, I was deprived of the “reflective attitude” that accompanies a conversation, according to van Manen (p. 67). Therefore, when reflecting on the text, I had to re-orientate myself to my research question in order to stay focused. This was challenging. Again, van Manen (2015) offers the researcher some helpful advice: one can go “everywhere and nowhere” in a “chaotic quest for meaning,” but one’s task is to stay attuned with and close to the experience as it is brought forth through the data (p. 67). Upon sifting through the anecdotal accounts, I was reminded to approach the text holistically, while asking myself, “What is meant by this phrase? What does it reveal?”

First-Order Constructs

In attempting to cluster ideas from the initial data, or “units of meaning,” one should use the “literal words of the participants” (King, 2014, p. 174). Doctoral candidate at the University of Sheffield David King (2014), calls these statements “first order constructs” (p. 175). In

observing each text as a whole I was able to highlight those sentences that seemed “particularly evocative” and/or pointed to something significant about the experience being described (van Manen, 2014, p. 337). Based upon the sentences presented in the text boxes below, I continued my exploration of the emerging themes with a follow-up phone call in hope of delving deeper into what the experiences described were like for the participants. The following boxes contain phrases that started to coalesce into categories. Boxes were given titles that loosely described the content.

Text Box 1: Spirituality as Part of Client experience

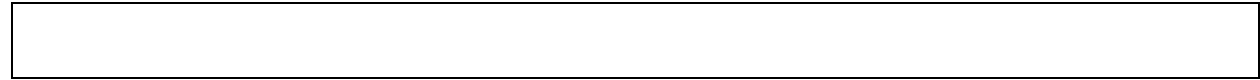
“I think it is important to have an integrative approach and recognize the impacts of biology, psychology, social aspects, as well as spiritual.” Participant 1 (P1)

“Fundamentally, I think it is [an] essential part of the human experience to recognize the different spheres of our life that intersect—physical, psychological, social, spiritual, etc.” (P1)

“I have been a Christian for most of my life and consider God as my main source of wisdom.” (P2)

“The ‘real world’ troubles were addressed practically by integrating the positive aspects of my faith. What, in my heart, did I deeply desire and wish to happen? T. S. helped me move forward using my faith not as a crutch, but a catalyst.” (P3)

“Her faith is part of who she is as opposed to a technique or skill.” (P5)

**Text Box 2: Effective Communication**

“[I] greatly appreciate having a therapist that recognizes the importance of spirituality and respects/affirms where I am in my journey.” (P1)

“[I hoped] that I would be respected and affirmed, and encouraged to continue to explore what faith means to me” (P1)

(In regard to non-FBC) “I felt she was ‘listening’ but not ‘hearing.’” (P3)

“The greatest difference was the feeling of ‘connectedness’ to the FBC. Concepts, emotions, and experiences all reached a deeper level.” (P3)

“[The non-FBC] seemed only to get a superficial image of who I was and what I longed to understand.” (P3)

“The FBC was able to see me and allow me to see myself more holistically.” (P3)

“Would the sessions, in a fair, understandingly sensitive, and informed manner allow my faith to be explored as part of the counselling experience?(P3)

“I suppose I craved validation.” (P3)

“She did not accept, and challenged me when I could not turn my back on a person who continually hurt me. My faith encourages me to keep trying to accept and not turn my back or cut off ties to friends and family.” (P4)

“So being a Christian (therapist) in itself, is not enough to make me feel understood.” (P5)

“And now with my Christian counsellor, I can share the intersection of my abuse/shame/experience of God. After dealing with layers and layers of shame and unworthiness I can now more fully embrace my spirituality.” (P5)

“At the stage I am at now, it is a Godsend to have a Christian counsellor with whom I can share the deep ways that the shame of the abuse distorted my view of myself and of God.” (P5)

Text Box 3: Acceptance and Safety

With one counsellor, I was accepted and felt safe and comfortable in the warmth of his feedback.” (P3)

“The fact that I was given the safe space to process my thoughts/feelings surrounding faith (and anything existential) has been very important and made a huge difference to me.” (P1)

“[The FBC was] welcoming and provided a safe place to explore faith as an aspect of my life.” (p 3)

“The biggest difference was the fundamental level of comfort and ease of the discourse.” (P3)

“With respect, [I] needed to feel safe and hoped my faith wouldn’t be questioned or examined.” (P4)

“My motivation for choosing each [counsellor] has been the need to feel safe.” (P5)

“It is only the past few years that I have been able to work with a Christian counsellor and feel safe and accepted. Partly I am experiencing less shame and partly I have a really safe counsellor in all ways. I can now talk about some of the things that I internalized as a child.” (P5)

“My criteria for choosing a counsellor has always been about emotional safety.” (P5)

“[L]earning to feel safe to share my spirituality / faith has been a slow process.” (P5)

Text Box 4: Counsellor Empathy and Understanding

“Given that I’ve felt often judged and condemned by the church, it is especially important and special that my therapist did not pressure me to feel any certain way about church/religion, but instead gave me the space to figure out how I felt and what was important to me.” (P1)

“If therapists can do this and also hold their own faith, this is a beautiful thing.” (P1)

“[I] trust that someone who understands my faith will also hear from God.” (P2)

“[M]y faith encouraged me to treat people with renewed patience and respect. There had long been an incongruency in this part of my life. With the help of the FBC I was able to make changes that propelled me to greater success in all aspects of my life.” (P3)

“I did not need to justify anything, T. S. helped me move forward using my faith not as a crutch, but a catalyst.” (P3)

“[I]n my first sessions . . . I was not certain if the counsellor had to hold the exact same faith perspective as myself, but considered that a basic understanding was essential. We needed to communicate in a similar language.” (P3)

“How secure was the counsellor in their own development in this area to recognize and assist my spiritual understandings?” (P3)

“I wanted to discuss deeper spiritual understandings and how they were supported by relevant and cohesive theological discourse.” (P3)

“I wanted a faith based counseling for marriage as I assume they would hold the same beliefs on commitment as I do and have an understanding of my background.” (P4)

“[W]hen I was working with a secular counsellor, I was often nervous about bringing up my faith issues. It seems one already has to do this in a secular society. . . . I needed someone who can at least have a sense of where I came from.” (P5)

“Her faith is part of who she is as opposed to a technique or skill. . . . It adds to her effectiveness with me as I look at the impact of my experiences on my spirituality.” (P5)

Emergent Themes

Keeping in mind van Manen’s three methods of isolating themes (cited in Chapter 3 above), I attempted to cluster the data. Every sentence was looked at with the following question in mind: “What may this sentence or sentence cluster be seen to reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described” (van Manen, 2014, p. 337). Once the highlighted phrases were extracted from the text, I attempted to make meaning of them, or to “interpret the meaning from the verbatim text so as to illuminate the phenomenon in approachable terms” (King, 2014, p. 175). King (2014) refers to the results of this process as “second order constructs,” which reflect the way in which the researcher makes meaning of that which is being interpreted (p. 175).

Within each clustered group of data, I began to look for common themes. As I re-read and reflected on the data, I began to dwell upon places where I saw patterns developing. The next step was to follow up with a telephone conversation, in which I hoped to get closer to the experience recalled in the written account. As I reflected on the data collected, I began taking notes regarding the follow-up questions I would ask via the telephone. I knew I needed to delve deeper and was reminded to observe the following:

IPA is helpful here because of the painstaking attention it gives to enabling the participant to recount as full an account as possible of their experience. This requires a high level of skill on the part of the interviewer—a combination of strong empathic engagement and highly attuned antennae ready to probe further into interesting and important aspects (Smith & Osborne, 2015, para. 4).

The phone conversations enabled me to follow up with questions that were more specific, allowing the participants to reflect further on their experiences and allowing myself to elucidate deeper meanings (cf. van Manen, 2015, p. 99). Van Manen (2015) summarizes this well: “the conversation aims at producing themes, insights, [and] the researcher eventually needs to create a text to which the themes, the fruits of the conversational relation, are able to minister” (p. 100). During the phone conversations, I was struck by how often questions continued to bring forth more questions between the interviewer and the interviewee. “The art of questioning,” writes van Manen (2015), “is that of being able to go on asking questions, i.e., the art of thinking” (p. 98). The beauty of the phone conversations was the way in which they permitted a deeper collaboration. I got a clear sense that the participants were interested in, and even passionate about, my project. They had a willingness to participate in this study and were curious about the

results. I felt myself caring for and engaging with the participants both because of the level of intimacy inherent in the topic and because of the way we reflected together on their experiences. The inflection of the participants' voices, their commitment to sharing their stories, and the weaving in and out of the shared dialogue strengthened the meaning-making process.

Following the telephone conversations, I continued to look at the texts in light of my original data. I began to consider how the themes were connected or overlapped. Larkin and Thompson (2012) note that at some point in his or her analysis the researcher begins to work across the data set, sees the connections between cases, and identifies what is captured across the dataset as a whole. I found that the task of dwelling with the text post-phone conversations allowed me to get at deeper meanings. van Manen (2014) speaks to this next step:

[T]he writer must enter the dark, the space of the text, in the hope of seeing what cannot really be seen, hearing what cannot really be touched. This is what Robert Frost once called "falling forward into the dark." Darkness is the method. (p. 392)

King (2014), affirms that extracting ideas or themes from the data is not enough, and that interpreting and illuminating the meaning of the data should be the researcher's goal (p. 173).

After clustering the data into sets, I noticed themes arising. The themes started percolating as I contemplated the clustered sets of data. Next, I extrapolated four overarching themes from the clusters:

1. *Spirituality is intrinsic to the human experience.*
2. *A client needs to be heard and to be understood.*
3. *A client needs to feel safe in the therapeutic conversation.*
4. *A therapist, although holding his or her own perspective, should be informed or trained to help others hold their perspectives as well.*

A Closer Look

Theme 1. *Spirituality is intrinsic to the human experience.*

In regard to the sentences and phrases clustered in the set I identified as Theme 1, I was interested in how participants described their faith or spirituality as an integral component of who they were. In Chapter 2, I referred to the fact that a large majority of the world's human population acknowledges or adheres to some sort of religion. Inherent in the comments lay a sense of faith being systemic to who the participants are as people—a sense that we human creatures are spiritual beings created by God and that, therefore, the presence of God within us must be acknowledged. Participant 1 stated, “[I]t really feels strange to separate the spiritual from the rest of me, it would feel like only part of me could be present in the session.” Participant 2, in our follow-up conversation, described the experience of working with a non-faith based counsellor (NFBC):

[T]he world seemed black and white, our conversation felt bland, based on some sort of formulae . . . like she was referring to some sort of theoretical framework in order to relate to me . . . but then on the other hand with a faith based counselor [hereafter FBC], the experience felt like it was brilliant color, infused with a spectrum of possibilities.

This participant also said, in a more subdued voice, “[T]he word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit represents life . . . and this is where my hope lies.” Participant 3 stated he did not come from a faith background but felt that those with a faith background had something “different and remarkable.” Therefore, because he admired and trusted their opinions, he felt an FBC might hold values similar to his own. He felt strongly that faith had been intrinsic to his being even before he recognized it as such.

Many of the participants described their faith as a gift, not separate from who they were as people. They expressed the need to find a counsellor who saw the spiritual aspect of their lives as coequal with the emotional and physical aspects. Participant 5 stated, “I had never considered addressing my spiritual side in counselling. . . . [I]t happened by accident and [I] am glad it did.”

Theme 2: A client needs to be heard and to be understood.

The following sentence was written by Participant 1, who, although she still identified as a Christian, had grown up in a conservative Christian church which had left her hurt and disillusioned: “I have experienced a lot of trauma/judgement/guilt from my time in the Christian church, and it is very helpful that my therapist can understand this.” Her desire for counselling was prompted by the need to heal the wounds of the past. She reached out to her FBC because she was looking for a way to reconcile her past experience with her current experience. In our follow-up conversation, she revealed that because of her experience in the Christian church, only an FBC would truly understand her narrative about what it was like to grow up in this way. She revealed that she felt the FBC was able to make space for her to process her need to remove herself from the church. She felt that perhaps an NFBC could do so to some extent, but her issues of shame or guilt connected to her past faith needed be processed with the help of someone who truly understood her narrative about them. She feared judgement and shaming, which she had experienced earlier in her life, and she needed to feel safe exploring this experience:

I really needed for someone to get how the church hurt me. . . . [M]aybe I needed to have someone get that church is different from God. I needed to know that the counsellor really see[s] that difference. I was so scared to leave the church.

This participant also added that, regardless of the counsellor’s faith orientation, rapport was still of paramount importance in the relationship.

Participant 2 said, “A counsellor might get how I feel . . . but might not support me in accessing how God could help.” Further, in our phone conversation, this same participant shared with me that speaking with an NFBC felt like speaking a different language: “How could she really get me? I needed to explain tenants [*sic*] of my faith. She looked at me blankly, and I knew we were not speaking the same language.” The participant commented that the counsellor would counsel her from the perspective of modern psychology but would not point to or *see* the core of who she was or understand the standpoint from which she viewed the world. She questioned whether she could grow spiritually while working with an NFBC.

Participant 3 revealed that in his counselling experience he did feel that the NFBC was listening, and yet he, the participant, did not feel heard: “the counsellor was respectful and seemed to employ the right techniques, and yet when speaking of spiritual concerns the conversation seemed hollow.” This participant further revealed that being understood also meant not having to explain or justify his faith. Almost apologetically, he said, “I suppose I craved validation.”

Theme 3. *A client needs to feel safe in the therapeutic conversation.*

As a counsellor, I am interested in a client-centered approach to practicing my profession. The tenets of a therapeutic relationship include creating a safe place for conversations to occur, a place for people to share their presenting concerns. This means creating an environment where clients are not only understood but also seen for who they are. For some clients their hope for healing or change is seen through the lens of their faith. In reflecting on the data, I noted that references to the importance of feeling safe occurred frequently in the sentences I was reading. Participant 1 stated, “the fact that I was given the safe space to process my thoughts/feelings surrounding faith (and anything existential) has been very important and made a huge difference

to me.” In our follow-up phone conversation, this participant continued to disclose how the therapist’s holding this space open made it possible for her to explore the most serious aspects of her decision to leave her church. She stressed the importance of rapport: “I still am unsure whether I need a Christian counsellor to feel safe. . . . I suppose a rapport means I will feel safe. Rapport has to be there to move forward . . . but what exactly constitutes rapport could perhaps be argued.” Without safety in the client–therapist relationship, regardless of faith, she could not allow herself to become vulnerable in the therapeutic conversation.

In response to a survey question about what she hoped for in choosing an FBC, Participant 4 stated that she needed “respect, needed to feel safe and hoped my faith wouldn’t be questioned or examined.” This participant felt self-conscious exploring her marital issues with an NFBC because she wondered if her position in respect to divorce—specifically, that it was “not an option”—would be recognized or respected. Another sticking point was that, when she brought up the struggles she was having with an estranged sister, she was advised to “let go,” to put herself first and ignore the division this issue was causing in her family: “She [the NFBC] absolutely did not get how my faith was propelling me to keep the relationship intact! I did not agree with the counsellor’s label in that it defined me as an ‘over-functioner.’” This participant was longing for a way to reconcile with her sister, partly guided by her faith beliefs, and eventually found a therapist who could help her mend the relationship in a way that was congruent with her values.

My own experience has been that when clients seek counselling they often find it challenging to address issues, such as those that are faith related, that are particularly personal . How a client could possibly address sensitive personal issues in the absence of “a safe place” in which to do so is inconceivable to me. In my follow-up conversation with Participant 2, she

stated that sharing those things that deeply mattered to her would involve opening up and making herself vulnerable, and her experience with an NFBC left her unable to do so. Yet she doubted that she could move forward in the conversation about her struggles with the church without such opening up. Therefore, she commented, “Trying to reframe everything so my NFBC could understand was time consuming, a waste of time.” Participant 3 said he felt that, as compared to an NFBC, an FBC was “welcoming and provided a safe place to explore faith as an aspect of my life. . . . The biggest difference was the fundamental level of comfort and ease of the discourse.” In our follow-up conversation he deepened these thoughts by sharing how he could trust the FBC to take the therapy in a direction that was congruent with his sense of self:

It is liberating, freeing, fluid when you are made to feel safe about all aspects of your faith. The safety was implicit in that I did not even have to explain my faith. . . . [I]t was simply the lens through which he saw me.

Participant 5 stated it took a long time to feel safe with an FBC. She had seen both NFBCs and FBCs and had not spoken about her faith until recently:

I always held my faith close to protect it. . . . [T]hen by accident I came across a Christian counsellor and to my surprise [*sic*] recognized something in her that I also had. I am still with this counsellor 4 years later. I think that says everything.

Theme 4: *A therapist, although holding his or her own perspective, should be informed or trained to help others hold their perspectives as well.*

Greenridge and Baker (2012) refer to a “Christian discourse” which entails a group of people who identify with certain beliefs and practices. The authors espouse a “social identity theory,” according to which people’s identity or sense of belonging is formed within a particular group to which they affiliate or with which they identify (p. 215). In a culture that often places

the Christian church under scrutiny, and in a province such as British Columbia where adherence to a religious faith is especially low, myself and those I interviewed who identify as Christian often feel judged (Canada, Statistics, 2011); Van Paassen, *Globe and Mail*, 2010). As I reflected on the comments of the participants in this study, it became clear that how they made meaning of their own experience was very much determined by the context in which they had been raised. As they processed their concerns with their counsellors, they came to realize that having a counsellor who understood their faith perspectives “was essential” (Participant 3). Participant 3 questioned whether counsellors could engage in conversations about “deeper spiritual understandings” or “recognize and assist others” in doing so if they themselves had limited training in addressing faith-based concerns. In our phone conversation, Participant 3 said there was comfort in his connection with his FBC, a comfort based on like-mindedness. He used the word “sympatico” and the phrase “being in sync with” to denote this mental connection. He felt passionate about his experience: “working with an FBC is like hav[ing] a moral compass, someone that could hold me up to another standard.”

Participant 1 disclosed that it was more important that her therapist had good credentials than that he or she had an understanding of her faith. Nonetheless, she felt that when a therapist can combine good qualifications and faith “this is a beautiful thing.” We continued to discuss her experience at length in our follow-up conversation, in which she remarked, “The beauty is the essence . . . the thing that most NCBCs don’t get. Might not be essential but when it is there. . .” I sensed a feeling of ease in her voice as she said this.

Participant 2 revealed that she was not so interested in particular theories or modalities of therapy as in finding someone who felt accountable to his or her own faith and could support her in a therapeutic process that might include consulting a higher power. She concluded that rapport

(regardless of faith) was essential to a successful outcome. Participant 5, however, revealed a different side of faith-based counselling. As a Christian woman in an abusive marriage, she was having difficulty reconciling her decision to divorce her husband with the tenets of her religion. Her FBC held the strict view that divorce was impermissible in Christian marriage regardless of problems such as physical abuse. Participant 5, who had experienced violence in her first marriage, expressed the painful sense of being victimized again when her FBC suggested that because of her faith she should remain in her marriage and “try to work it out”: “I needed to know I was OK to leave. . . . I was already diminished, and now God would expect me to stay?” Her experience added another layer of complexity to her search for a counsellor who could help her work through the guilt and shame of ending her marriage, while abiding with her faith as a support to her during a difficult time. Our conversation ended with her words, “[N]ow I understand how my faith intersects with psychological interventions and is a needed piece of my healing.”

Some Added Thoughts

In sifting through the data I obtained from the surveys and conversations, I identified themes and commonalities among the experiences recounted by the participants. Although some aspects of the experiences described were unique to the individual participants, I was interested in their collective experience as clients seeking help in resolving their psychological troubles in a faith-based manner. I was interested not only in the four major themes that emerged from my research but also in the way these themes intersected with each other. Figure 1 illustrates these intersections and suggests in broad contours what I believe ought to be incorporated into training curriculums for counsellors in order to prepare them to work effectively with faith-based clients.

Professor and chair of counselling at Oakland University Todd, Leibert (2011), in his research of the common factors that make counselling effective, found that the therapeutic relationship remains among the most-studied of these factors, a finding that holds true across approaches and modalities. He states that “clients valued the same core qualities regardless of which treatment they received: the practitioner’s personality, time to talk to an accepting person, help to better understand their problem, encouragement to gradually face their problems, and assistance towards gaining self-awareness” (p. 132). Leibert goes on to suggest that, although schools of counselling provide training intended to ensure that these core qualities take hold, it would be more helpful to determine “what specific approach” would be most beneficial:

When orientation and technique are congruent with client worldview, skills and resources, it is more likely that agreement of goals and tasks of treatment are secured.

When treatment orientation is tailored to clients, hope is instilled, the relationship is enhanced, and extra therapeutic factors are optimized (2011, p. 134).

The lived experiences of my clients corroborate these findings. What worked for them was not so much a particular technique or intervention but a worldview that was congruent with their values or faith orientations. I was not surprised to find that some of the participants appreciated having a therapist who identified as a Christian, even though this very identification could become problematic when interventions were scripturally informed and the client and the counsellor differed in their interpretations of the relevant scripture. Conversely, some participants stated that if the counsellor understood their religious language and the way in which their beliefs informed their lives and gave them meaning, then perhaps a meaningful collaboration could take place. However, a common experience of the participants was that counsellors often did not know how to frame struggles in the context of a client’s faith experience, or lacked an understanding of how

faith could inform the manner in which they resolved their issues. Regardless of faith orientation, however, a skilled therapist should be able to help a client navigate the dissonance between his or her beliefs and actions (Rollins, 2009).

Conversations regarding tensions between the Christian client and the Christian counsellor shed an unexpected light on the question of why some participants sought the help of an FBC in the first place, rather than that of an ordained minister of their faith. The latter course, they reported, was not an option because of the directive way in which pastors or priests approached their congregants' problems. Most participants liked the idea of having a counsellor who was curious enough to see how religious beliefs could provide strength in difficult times, even though such a counsellor was not always available (P1, P3, P4, P5). Another noteworthy finding was that some participants experienced their faith in a way that involved mystery and wanted their counsellors to leave room for that experience, even though this might conflict with the counsellors' efforts to understand the role of faith beliefs in helping clients make sense of things (P1, P2, P3, P5). Some things are just not amenable to being explained.

As I continued to examine the themes, I began to see redundancies, an overlapping of data that emerged as a result of going deeper into the phenomena that inspired our conversations, and to uncover more of their essences. To further interpret the themes, I cross-referenced them, which helped me explore more deeply what the individuals' lived experiences were and how they were made manifest. To facilitate the cross-referencing, I gave each of the four themes an abbreviated designation:

Theme 1 = Intrinsic Spirituality

Theme 2 = Hearing/Understanding

Theme 3 = Safety

Theme 4 = Therapist Training

By pairing these themes, I arrived at six combinations or intersections. This allowed me to obtain a deeper understanding of how the thematic lived experiences correlated. As I reflected on these intersections, further questions arose in my mind. These questions reflected the connectedness of the data. They also led me to a sense of resolution, to a realization of the purposes and desires that motivated this study.

Intersection of Themes 1 and 2. How well do the clients feel their stories are being understood? Was there validation or conflict with their therapists? Did faith help or hinder the sessions? Did the therapists have a sense of how spirituality is inherent to the well-being of an individual?

Intersection of Themes 1 and 3. Was there a definition of safety in the session? How does faith affect or support the safety? Was counselling less safe with an NFBC than with an FBC, or was it equally safe? Also, in the case of counselling with an FBC, did the client feel safe even if the FBC's religious views were more conservative or more liberal than his or her own?

Intersection of Themes 1 and 4. Was the client aware of the nature or extent of the counsellor's training? Was there a significant difference in this regard between the FBC and the NFBC? Did clients feel that their counsellors were adequately prepared or informed to address issues of faith in the counselling room?

Intersection of Themes 2 and 3. Was there an element of safety brought forth in the language or conversational style of the FBC and/or the NFBC? Was the level of safety sufficient to allow the dialogue to be spontaneous and free-flowing? Did the client perceive the therapist as warm, empathetic, accepting, etc., or as distant, indifferent, judgmental, etc.?

Intersection of Themes 2 and 4. Did the therapist's training (or lack thereof) regarding spiritual issues seem evident? Did the sessions progress in a positive, supportive, and enlightening way? Was the faith perspective (or lack thereof) responsible for outcomes? Did it motivate the client to book future sessions? Did the NFBC attempt to address a faith issue or to follow up on that issue in a future session?

Intersection of Themes 3 and 4. What body language or other nonverbal cues did the therapists employ? What specific training did either the FBCs or the NFBCs receive in establishing a sense of safety? Was either kind of therapist able to guide or facilitate the sessions in a way that was regenerative for the client?

These thoughts and questions guided the dialogue that was had in the follow-up conversations. Seeing the intersections between themes helped clients understand how their lived experiences were expressed in the counselling room. A guiding principle in phenomenological research is to investigate not only what the participants are experiencing, but also the contexts or situations in which the experiences take place. During the telephone conversations, I was aware of the added immediacy of direct interpersonal communication as compared to the participants' written discourse. I questioned how my own writing of this research report might change the psychological meaning or decontextualize what was being said (cf. van Manen, 2014, p. 382). As van Manen (2014) points out, "writing is activity" (p. 383), and it was my hope that my writing could bring forth meaning in a way that made sense of the depth of the participants' experiences. Throughout this study, my problem was to distinguish between making meaning of those experiences and making meaning of the concepts used in interpreting them. Gadamer (1975, as cited in van Manen, 2014) states that a similar problem arises whenever we try to recover memory through reflection, adding that we never truly recover an experience as it happened in

the moment (p. 405). My hope in writing this thesis was to capture the participants' experience of counselling in language without allowing that very language to become a barrier to meaning.

The diagram shown in Figure 1 represents the four major themes discussed above, with the central category of lived experience standing for the zone of intersection.

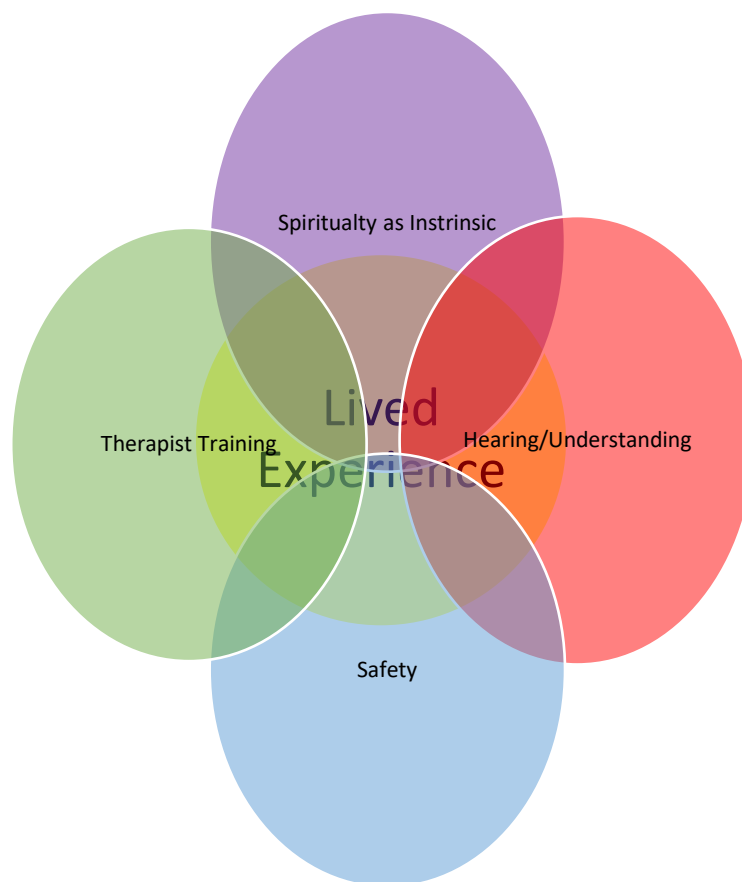


Figure 1. Lived Experience as the Common Element in the Four Themes.

Limitations

A limitation of this study may have been the online-survey format, which might have produced less depth than I might have obtained had I interviewed the participants in person. However, the online survey may have provided information that the participant found difficult to say in person. It also may have allowed the participants to take the time to articulate their thoughts and feelings thoroughly and to correct anything that wasn't a true reflection of their experience. Although the

follow-up conversations on the telephone partly remedied this, it was also limited in that a face to face meeting might enhance a sense of intimacy. However, some people like talking on the telephone where they cannot see the other person. The method, then, may have been a barrier for some participants, some of the time, while at the same time providing safety or comfort for others some of the time. The Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching (n.d.) states that since phenomenological research requires interpretation, researcher bias may be difficult to determine or detect (para. 3). Lavery (2003) addresses issues of rigor in phenomenological research, and states that without agreement in language, credibility of the research can be confusing (p. 24). Furthermore, the author states that credibility depends on how vivid and faithful the descriptions are (p.23).

The value of this type of study is the deep understanding gained from hearing another's experience. My hope is that the meaning extracted from the experiences of my participants will outweigh the study's limitations and bring clarity to a topic that appears to be under-researched.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

Hebrews 11: 1 (KJV)

For the purposes of this research, I engaged in a phenomenological inquiry with the intent of looking at the lived experiences of faith based participants seeking counselling. In reflecting on these experiences, my aim was to consider the preparedness of their counsellors to address issues of faith and/or spirituality. As Hage (2006) remarks, “It is important that graduate programs provide psychologists in training with opportunities for self-exploration and reflection related to the potential impact of their spiritual values and biases on others” (p. 306). My own experience in a graduate program in counselling exposed me to diverse theories, approaches, and clients; yet little attention was given to examining our own beliefs concerning spirituality or to preparing us to counsel people who adhere to a faith tradition.

Clients seek help, often in crisis situations. For many, adherence to faith-based practices may have been suppressed or purposely disregarded in the context of various life transitions. Then, as they are faced with potentially life-changing events or crises, their faith-based values or beliefs resurface and may need to be reframed so that they can continue to support them and give meaning to their lives (Worthington, 1989). A counsellor is trained with skills and tools to listen to another’s story and should do so without skepticism or judgement. An effective counsellor will have examined the beliefs that inform his or her own story, the better to help others make meaning of theirs (Kutuzova, 2010). A challenge presents itself in the counselling room when the worldview held by the counsellor is in conflict with that of the client.

The experiences of those involved in this study was that such a conflict had arisen in their therapeutic relationships. Some wondered why topics relating to faith or spirituality were minimized in their conversations with their NFBCs. Others were confronted with challenges related to differences in theological orientation between their FBCs and themselves. Still others concluded that the rapport between counsellor and client was more important than questions of faith. One theme that arose while exploring the participants' lived experience was their need to feel safe and to feel understood. The participants longed for their counsellors to understand the beliefs that informed the current struggles they were having. When such understanding was lacking, the result was a lack of connection in the therapeutic conversation. Those counsellors who demonstrated that they understood the impact of spirituality in their clients' lives, even when they did not share their clients' faith perspectives, established a better rapport than those who showed less understanding. However, counsellors who had a faith perspective of their own came closer to the participants' ideal conception of what a counsellor should be. When counselled by FBCs, participants experienced decreased fear of shame or judgement, felt less inhibited in bringing religion into the conversation, and had a stronger sense of safety. The lived experience of most participants suggested that the environment most conducive to a therapeutic experience was one in which the desiderata expressed in the four themes discussed in Chapter 4 were satisfied.

A significant aspect of my experience in conducting this study presented itself in the phone conversations I had with the participants. The ordinary became extraordinary (cf. van Manen, 2014, p. 38). I wondered what it was like for the participants to reflect on their lived experience in relation to the phenomena that occurred in the counselling room. As they started to see things in new ways, so too did I; my personal experience began to fuse with theirs. This led

me to question Freud's dismissal of religious faith. I am confident that we can be effective psychodynamic counsellors of clients who adhere to deep religious and spiritual values. My hope is that counselling programs will increasingly incorporate religion into their programs as a "therapeutic companion," alongside other cultural competencies (Leighton, 2016, p. 350).

As a Christian, I feel passionate about holding sacred the religious traditions that inform my beliefs. I also find myself drawn to the constructivist conception of meaning communities and feel that there is a way to hold both perspectives, since both, in essence, are concerned with people's attitudes and how they make sense of the world around them. Throughout this study, I have carefully borne in mind the phenomenological precept that everything is open to interpretation. In order to stay authentic in my work as a counsellor, I should be wary of my presuppositions as I interact with others who have different presuppositions. Watts (2011) expresses this idea well: "The boundaries around my values and beliefs should be permeable to allow consideration of other perspectives, religious and nonreligious" (p. 8).

I feel privileged and honoured in having had the opportunity of interacting with the participants who shared their stories with me. As a counsellor, I look forward to being able to listen to clients in a way that keeps my boundaries intact, although I am still learning what that means. I think it means being neither too rigid nor too fluid, but striking a balance that allows me not only to respect but to interact with others' preferred values. To uphold my faith and my professional integrity at the same time—this is the work to which I am called. Although I did not have the privilege of encountering those who participated in my study face to face, our five telephone conversations were a gift I shall cherish. There was ease and comfort in the dialogues we had. As van Manen (2017) remarks, "a conversation is a certain mode of togetherness, a certain way of sharing a world, of understanding and trusting each other, of experiencing a

shared sphere, and each other's company" (p. 817). An unexpected finding was that in revisiting their experiences the participants sometimes attained new insights. It was interesting to see how the counselling process that each participant had previously engaged in, while seemingly over and done with, was still capable of bearing new fruit. True healing and understanding is never static, never finally concluded.

“Recognize what is before your eyes, and the mysteries will be revealed to you.”

Gospel of Thomas

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Appendices

Appendix A

Initial Interview Questions as per Survey

1. Can you explain your motivation and/or approach in deciding to choose a counsellor who holds a faith-based perspective?
2. Can you tell me a little about the context of your decision to look for a counsellor?
3. In what way(s) do you feel your faith background was relevant to the context of that issue/situation?
4. Looking back, what were your hopes or expectations, concerning the ways your faith could be handled in your counselling sessions?
5. Were there any ways you had hoped the sessions might bring out your ability to reflect on the faith aspects of your life situation? If so, how?
6. How close was that to what actually happened, within those sessions? Can you explain using any examples? (I will keep your confidentiality, when analyzing and compiling my results in my thesis).
7. Looking back, were there any moments in the counselling process in which you felt particularly able to reflect on your situation with a faith perspective? (If so, can you tell me about them?)
8. Looking back, were there any moments in the counselling process in which you were not as pleased about your ability to reflect on your life situation from a faith perspective? (If so, can you tell me about them?)
9. What else would you like to comment about your experiences with that counsellor?

10. In your *previous* counselling experience(s), *before* that counsellor, what were your criteria in choosing a counsellor? To what extent would you describe the *previous* counsellor(s) as coming from a faith-based perspective or not?
11. What were the differences in your counselling experience? Can you provide examples?
12. What were the criteria that led you to choose a faith-based counsellor, or, to choose a secular counsellor?
13. What, if anything, were you imagining would be different?
14. To what extent did it make a difference, within those sessions, when you were talking about your concerns?
15. During the times that you met with a secular or non-faith-based counsellor, what have been your experiences when you have attempted to resolve presenting concerns or issues in a manner that was congruent to your faith or beliefs? Can you provide some examples? (Ask further questions to elaborate.)
16. Do you have anything to add, or any suggestions you would like to make?

Appendix B

Criteria for the selection process of the participants

1. Participants may or may not be currently in the process of counselling. However, they should have completed a set of counselling sessions. (This may have been in either the distant or recent past.)
2. Participants should be emotionally stable, to be able to reflect safely on their counselling experiences.
3. Participants should be able to reflect on some experiences of choosing a counsellor in a situation (or situations) wherein a faith component was a relevant factor.

Appendix C



**CITYU RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT
FOR ON-LINE SURVEYS AND INTERNET DATA COLLECTION**

Title of Project:

Christian clients' experiences of Christian vs secular counsellors

Name and Title of Researcher(s):

Flori Ens / Masters of Counselling Student

For Faculty Researcher(s):

Department: _____

Telephone: _____

Email: _____

Immediate Supervisor: _____

For Student Researcher(s):

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Susan Breiddal

Department: City U Counselling

Telephone: XXXX

E-mail: mailto:XXXX

You are being invited to participate in an on-line survey that is part of a research study that has been approved by City University of Seattle Institutional Review Board.

Purpose of Study:

_The purpose of this study is to explore what clients experience when they wish to discuss their personal concerns in a manner that is informed by their faith or spirituality. In view of the sparseness of previous research on the intersection of faith and counselling we know little about what clients think and feel when their faith is a significant component of what they need in a counselling setting_____

Research Participation:

The survey consists of 12 questions and is expected to take approximately at your leisure to complete. You may choose to answer as many questions as you decide and each question will have a “no response” choice.

Your involvement is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without negative consequences, by refusing to answer any further questions or exiting from the survey entirely. You may request a copy of the final research study report. Should you request a copy, you may be asked to pay the costs of photocopying and mailing.

Confidentiality

Participation is confidential to the limits of applicable privacy laws. No one except the faculty researcher or student researcher, his/her supervisor and Program Coordinator (or Program Director) will be allowed to view any information or data collected whether by questionnaire, interview and/or other means. If a student-teacher researcher’s cooperating classroom teacher will also have access to raw data, the following box will be checked. All data from the survey, computer discs, any backup of computer discs and any other storage devices are kept locked and password protected by the researcher. The research data will be stored for 1 years (5 years or more if required by local regulations). At the end of that time all data of whatever nature

will be permanently destroyed. The published results of the study will contain data from which no individual participant can be identified.

You are advised that the company hosting this survey is located in the United States and as such is subject to U.S. laws, including the US Patriot Act which allows authorities access to the records of internet service providers. Therefore, anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. If you choose to participate in this survey, you understand that your responses to the survey questions will be stored and may be accessed in the USA.

If you have any questions about this research contact the researcher and/or his/her supervisor, as listed on page one of this consent form.

Should you have any concerns about the way you have been treated as a research participant contact the following individual(s):

_____, Program Coordinator (and/or Program Director), City University of Seattle, at
Dr. Susan Breiddal ph. XXXX (address, direct phone line and CityU email address).

ELECTRONIC CONSENT: Please select your choice below.

Clicking on the "**agree**" button below indicates that:

- you have read and understand all of the above information, and
- you voluntarily agree to participate, and
- you are at least 18 years of age.

If you **do not wish to participate** in the research study, please decline participation by clicking on the "**disagree**" button.

Agree

Disagree

Thank you,

Flori Ens

Appendix D

Further Amendments

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Flori Ens and I am a student in the Master of Counselling program at City University of Seattle, Victoria campus. I am writing to thank-you for your interest in my research study about what the experiences are for clients who seek a faith based perspective as one component of their counselling process. The interview is not a therapy or counselling session. I am merely attempting to understand what your experience was, by asking questions that would allow you to clarify what that experience was like.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be sent a participant consent form. Upon consent you will receive another e-mail with a link to survey monkey at which time you can begin filling out your answers to the questions. Your identity (and the identity of your counsellors and their respective organizations) will be kept confidential and I will destroy any identifying information at the conclusion of the study.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not and are free to drop out at any time. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email me at ensflori@gmail.com or contact me at XXXX. A \$30-dollar gift card will be offered as a token of appreciation for your time and willingness to participate.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Flori Ens

Appendix E

Initial Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Flori Ens and I am a student in the Masters of Counselling Program at City University of Seattle, Victoria campus. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about what the experiences are for clients who seek a faith based perspective as one component of their counselling process. The interview is not a therapy or counselling session. I am merely attempting to understand what your experience was, by asking questions that would allow you to clarify what that experience was like.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be contacted to arrange a one hour interview at a time and place of your choosing. For the purposes of this study I will make an audio recording of our conversation so I can later transcribe it for data analysis. Your identity (and the identity of your counsellors and their respective organizations) will be kept confidential and I will destroy the audio recording at the conclusion of the study.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not and are free to drop out at any time. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email me at ensflori@gmail.com or contact me at XXXX.

A \$30-dollar gift card will be offered as a token of appreciation for your time and willingness to participate.

Thank-you very much.

Sincerely,
Flori Ens