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Abstract

This study examined the influence of earlier life experiences on the development of beginning counsellors' personal theories of counselling. The significance of the study lies in its potential to extend counsellor educators' knowledge of the early processes involved in personal theory building. A qualitative method using a phenomenological design was chosen for the study.

Five master's in counselling students, and two recent master's in counselling graduates were given a questionnaire to complete and then interviewed individually. A thematic analysis, and comparison to Skovholt's and Ronnestad's (1992) study *Themes in Counsellor Development* were used to interpret the results.

The findings revealed that theory development was impacted by normative and difficult life experiences and interpersonal relationships with parents, siblings, significant others, teachers, university professors, and counsellors.

It was recommended that the findings be used to support future directions for structuring theory-building activities to better address the developmental and personal attributes of counselling students.
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This thesis is a reflection of my own life and experiences, and I believe I have lived the process of creating my personal theory in all its degrees of intensity much in the same way as my participants. Over the past six years, I have experienced many life transitions in my family, including becoming a single parent, moving from Ontario, witnessing my eldest daughter graduate from high school and leave home, buying a new home, changing careers, and being a graduate student. The journey toward completing this degree was a rich and challenging one, and I truly believe I could not have done it without the support of the warm and wonderful people around me, whom I wish to thank.

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I hope other single parents can also be inspired to reach for their creative dreams; it is a truly great thing for your children to witness.

“If you throw your heart over that obstacle your horse will follow”.
Chapter 1: Introduction

As Goldman (1976) stated, “the counsellor is probably the least explained variable in counselling research” (p. 545). Although nearly 30 years old, this statement still encapsulates trends in counselling research and education, particularly in the area of theoretical development (Spruill & Benshoff, 2000). According to Spruill and Benshoff, research in theoretical development has historically been more oriented toward product than process, and little has been done to examine developmental processes involved in practice, particularly in the area of personal theory building.

Developing a personal theory of counselling is a highly valued component of counsellor education at the master’s level. The proposed standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs, Committee on Standards Revisions, (CACREP, 1999) formally recognize the importance of helping students to develop a cohesive theoretical framework on which to base their counselling practice. The council also recommends that students be exposed to models of counselling, so as to begin to develop a “personal model of counselling” (Draft III, Standard K.5c, p. 12).

Personal theory building requires counsellors to move beyond selection of strategies to develop a system for incorporating these orientations into a “personal theory of helpfulness” (Brammer, 1969, p. 181). In “a personal theory of counselling,” methodological preferences are organized into a cohesive working frame of reference that includes a “rationale for what one does in the name of helping” (p. 181).

The personal theory of counselling assignment I completed in 1999 as part of my Masters program was closely based on Brammer’s and MacDonald’s (1996) model. I was required to write a scholarly paper that presented my individual theory and practice of counselling. The approach could be eclectic, parallel currently existing approaches, or be a combination of both. Most importantly, the theory needed to reveal an understanding about the content and process of therapeutic change. Brammer and MacDonald recommended that the following elements be included in the theory:

1. Assumptions about human nature
2. Motivation
3. Characteristics of a fully functioning person

4. How problems develop

5. Goals of counselling

6. Style and techniques of treatment

7. Conditions for therapeutic change

Reflecting back on the process of constructing my theory, I believe that my understandings at the time were grounded in values and experiences that extended beyond what I had gleaned from my academic experiences. I also recall being preoccupied with finding "authenticity" throughout the process of creating my theory, and spent a great deal of time attempting to synthesize various academic paradigms with my personal beliefs and values. This was most evident in the process of selecting the values I imparted regarding culture and diversity, and in 1999 I wrote, "I believe that all counselling is multicultural counselling, my definition of multicultural moved beyond ethnicity to encompass the belief that cultural, political and sexual diversity exists within the dominant culture (Markowitz, 1994).

My values also came into play in my selection of theoretical orientations and understanding of the change process. Looking back on my personal theory document, my interest in integrative approaches was evident, "I believe that it is important to have a variety of "lenses" (Carter, 1995), or systems through which to view individuals, and assist them with the change process".

I continue to use integrative approaches in my practice, and my current views on the change process have basically remained unchanged from what I wrote in 1999. These understandings are rooted in my own experiences of therapeutic change, and what I personally believed to be most effective:

Change occurs in the context of: (a) an empathic, accepting, non-judgmental environment in which (b) the client is motivated to change, and recognizes her agency in the process; (c) has the opportunity to explore problematic constructs interpersonally with the therapist, and views the process as a collaborative one (a "co-construction"); (d) is given the opportunity to redesign, reframe and transform problematic belief systems into preferred ways of perceiving the world and; (e) emerges with a more empowered way of seeing and being in the world
(Nichols & Schwartz, 1998) which transcends the limitations in the client’s world view (Mahoney, 1991).

When writing my theory paper, I had an innate awareness that my own values and experiences had something to do with my selection of theoretical approaches, and understanding of therapeutic change, however I did not reflect much upon this at the time. My interest in how these life experiences intersected with theory building gained momentum as I got further into my career and had to put my personal theory into practice. A commitment to remaining authentic in my work further fuelled this interest, as did my awareness that my own personal and professional development had an ongoing impact on my practice.

Combining my interests, and assumptions about theory development with Spruill and Benshoff’s (2000) assertion that research in theoretical development has done little to examine developmental processes involved in personal theory building, inspired me to engage in this study. This study is designed to address developmental, and experiential factors contributing to personal theory building.

This chapter presents an introduction of this study and includes the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, definitions of terms and concepts, assumptions, delimitations and the plan of the study.

Statement of the Problem

George Kelly (1955) provided a metaphor for understanding the concept of personal theories by suggesting that each person “looks at the world through their own unique set of templates, called constructs, which are intended to order experience” (p. 21). Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) asserted that this type of reflection is important to counsellor development and stated: “The importance of continuous professional reflection of the impact of ‘intense professional and personal experience’ suggests that interpersonal experiences in both public and private domains are essential to counsellor development” (p. 509).

With currently well over 200 established models/theories of counselling and psychotherapy (Corsini & Wedding, 1995), counselling practitioners and students have vast opportunities to “stand on the shoulders” of other theorists to build on their personal
theories (Brammer, Abrego, & Shostrom, 1993, p. 20), but do not appear to have vast opportunities to reflect on how they got there (Spruill & Benshoff, 2000). Spruill and Benshoff (2000) indicated that current approaches to counsellor education are not as effective as they could be and “de-emphasize the importance of [students’] life experiences before graduate training” (p. 71). Granello and Hazler (1998) also pointed to the need to focus on students’ developmental processes as a way to maximize effectiveness of counsellor training.

In addition to recognizing the overall gaps in counsellor education, Spruill and Benshoff (2000) identified that little research had been done to examine factors contributing to beginning counsellors’ early practices and observed that more research is needed to attend to phenomena between theoretical inception and actual practice. They specifically indicated that personal theory development could benefit from more focus on activities that integrate the personal and professional self.

As personal theories are to provide the beginning frameworks that eventually guide beginning counsellors’ professional practice (CACREP, 1999), it bodes well to heed Spruill and Benshoff’s (2000) recommendation to examine factors contributing to beginning counsellors’ early practices by looking at some of the developmental and experiential factors contributing to personal theory building.

The primary research question guiding this study—*Do earlier life experiences influence graduate students’ personal theories of counselling?*—was asked to affirm whether or not the process of creating a personal theory of counselling is influenced by life experiences.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to extend counsellor educators’ knowledge of the early processes involved in developing personal theories of counselling. Understanding the conscious and underlying motivations behind counsellors’ initial selection and design of theoretical orientation has potential implications for course design and program development in counsellor education. The results of the study may also provide counsellor educators with a structure to design theory courses to attend better to
beginning counsellors' developmental needs (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Spruill & Benshoff, 2000).

By examining the potential influence of "earlier life experiences" on personal theories of counselling, and identifying experientially unique ways that beginning counsellors make meaning by creating their personal theories, the process hoped to further illuminate how counsellor development is closely intertwined with theoretical orientation.

In addition to adding to the body of knowledge on counsellors' developmental processes with regard to theory building, the findings from this research might also be of interest to practicum and intern supervisors interested in better supporting the development of praxis in the early stages of integrating knowing and doing.

**Definitions of Terms and Concepts**

*Life Experiences.* Life experiences encompass career, educational, and personal influences on professional and career development (Merriam & Yang, 1996; Super, 1980). "Earlier" life experiences in the context of this study connotes life experiences prior to entering the Master's in Counselling Program.

*Personal Theory of Counselling.* A personal theory of counselling is a rationale for what one does, and why one is doing it, in the name of helping (Brammer & MacDonald, 1996). A Personal theory should contain basic assumptions about how people learn and change, how personality develops, and how motivation is generated. A personal theory should also contain a philosophical dimension that includes one's values and expected outcomes (Brammer & MacDonald, 1996). The concept of *paradigm* is closely aligned to personal theory of counselling and is used in a similar fashion in the literature (Brammer & MacDonald, 1996; Cheston, 2000). The organization of counselling theory and practice to assist counsellors in sorting out the similarities and differences between counselling theories allows them eclectically to use various theories and techniques without losing the consistency and cohesiveness of working within a structure (Cheston, 2000).

*Theoretical Orientation.* Theoretical orientation (noun) is the counsellor's choice of theoretical perspective(s). Theoretical orientation (verb) is the actual task of selecting a
theory that fits with one's personality and/or values (Murdock, Banta, Joyce, Stromseth, Viene, & Brown, 1998).

Integration. Integration connotes the joining of different schools of counselling. An organizing concept or paradigm unifies the disparate pieces of theory and technique used, such as the role of client and counsellor, therapeutic change, evaluation, and so forth. Integration is the bringing together of established theoretical orientations into an eclectic approach (Kelly, 1997).

Eclecticism. Eclecticism is the selection and use of individual professional practices that are deemed to have a lesser degree of conceptual or theoretical alignment than integrative approaches (Corey, 1996; Lebow, 1984). The terms technical eclecticism and theoretical eclecticism more aptly differentiate eclecticism from integration. The technical eclectic counsellor uses procedures drawn from diverse sources without necessarily subscribing to the theories or disciplines that spawned them, whereas the theoretical eclectic counsellor tends to draw from diverse systems that may be epistemologically incompatible.

Dialectical Thinking. Dialectical thinking is the clarification of ideas through recognizing the interplay of opposites with the goal of reconciliation and deeper understanding (Hanna, Giordano, & Francesca, 1996).

Reflectivity. Reflectivity is active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads (Dewey, 1933). In current educational contexts reflection is seen “as the learner’s capacity to tolerate the ambiguity of not knowing” (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998, p. 80).

Adult Development. Adult development implies that (a) there is a change of some sort, (b) the change is organized systematically, and (c) the change involves succession over time (Lerner, 1986).

Counsellor Development. Counsellor development in counsellor education implies that counsellor trainees pass through a series of identifiable, sequential, and hierarchical stages and that different trainee needs exist across the different stages (Watkins, 1994). Counsellors progress through notable developmental stages across the career lifespan characterized overall by a move (a) from an imitation of others to a
confidence in self, (b) from a reliance on techniques to a trust in the process, (c) from a
distinct personal and professional life to an integration of the self, and (d) from being
overwhelmed with attempts to integrate data to trusting one’s own accumulated wisdom
(Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Prior to embarking on this thesis, it is also important to further clarify what is
meant by the terms beginning counsellor and graduate student in the context of this
study. It should be noted that students in graduate programs come with varying degrees
of experience as practitioners, and assumptions cannot be made that they are all
beginning counsellors. For the sole purposes of this study however, the term beginning
counsellor will be used synonymously with the term graduate student to imply that
regardless of experience an active process of learning and assimilation is still under way
at this juncture of counsellor development. The term graduate student is also used broadly
in this study to define students as those in all stages of their master’s program including
up to two years post graduation.

*Assumptions*

The origins of this study are rooted in three major assumptions held by the
researcher. These assumptions are derived from the researcher’s own experiences of
creating a personal theory of counselling, and the review of the literature. The
assumptions are:

1. Creating a personal theory of counselling is a developmental activity influenced
by life experiences, particularly experiences occurring prior to graduate school.

2. Personal counselling deepens one’s understanding of theory and the change
process, particularly in the early stages of theory development and practice.

3. Professors of theory courses could have a major influence on counsellor
development because students are eager to learn and demonstrate conceptual ideas and
 techniques during this period (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

In keeping with the philosophy of phenomenological research these assumptions
are mentioned so that the researcher’s bias may be openly acknowledged. The subjective
nature of qualitative research makes it imperative that the researcher reveals personal
perspectives that may influence the direction and interpretation of the research.
Delimitations

This study was intended to expand contextual knowledge of counsellors’ processes of creating a personal theory of counselling. The work was limited to increasing understanding, rather than providing explanation or original insights. It is also not to be assumed that these experiences are generalizable to other populations, as a study of this nature simply becomes an opportunity to contribute to existing bodies of knowledge. The specific limitations of the study will be discussed in more detail in chapters 3 and 5.

The Plan of the Study

A qualitative method using a phenomenological design was chosen for the study. A five-item questionnaire and individual interview were used to explore two major research questions: (a) Have your earlier life experiences influenced in any way the development of your personal theory of counselling? If so describe any specific experience(s) that influenced your theory; and (b) Were there any persons or groups of persons who influenced the development of your personal theory of counselling? If so describe how these persons or groups of persons influenced the development of your personal theory.

The study is reported in a descriptive and exploratory style that is a hallmark of qualitative research. Chapter 2 presents relevant literature on theoretical development, theories of counselling and psychotherapy, and counsellor development, with a specific focus on themes in counsellor development.

Chapter 3 provides the methodological foundation for the study. The phenomenological approach is explained in detail, including a description of instrumentation and data preparation. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive description of the data analysis process that is the blended result of several suggested methodologies for thematic analysis.

Chapter 4 presents themes and metathemes, and chapter 5 offers a summary of findings as they relate to the research question. The thesis concludes with chapter 6, which includes an integrated discussion on implications for future research and practice.
Chapter 2: Review of the Related Literature

The literature review documents the plausibility of the current research as it connects to previous research. This documentation assists with the process of facilitating an exploration among the research question, participants, literature, data, and the researcher's own experiences, so as to add to existing bodies of knowledge (Moustakas, 1996). No singular encompassing theoretical perspective in the research literature addressed the question directly, but the body of knowledge was rich enough to create a plausible synthesis for an exploration of how earlier life experiences influence beginning counsellors' personal theories of counselling.

This chapter surveys the lines of research relevant to the development of theoretical orientation and counsellor development. Concurring conceptual strands of the literature set the stage for the study in order to address the research question: Do earlier life experiences influence graduate students' personal theories of counselling?

The literature review, will be divided into two sections: Theoretical Foundations will present an overview of theoretical models presented in the research, and Relevant Studies will focus on examining studies relevant to the research.

Theoretical Foundations

In the past 30 years, research in the area of counselling and psychotherapy training and supervision has focused extensively on measuring and assessing theoretical orientation, beliefs, and preferences as a mechanism to facilitate the design of graduate programs (Coan, 1979; Loesch & McDavis, 1978; Tremblay, Herron, & Schultz, 1986; Warner, 1991). Historically, counsellors and psychologists have been encouraged to adopt a theoretical orientation early in their training (Finch, Mattson, & Moore, 1992; Murdock, 1991; Prochaska & Norcross, 1983) and studies have continued to investigate variables and predictors of students' theoretical orientation (Murdock et al., 1998; Prochaska & Norcross, 1983). Studies have also been conducted amongst experienced therapists to examine the correspondence between theoretical preferences and counselling behaviours (Hill & O'Grady, 1985).
Early studies globally measured theoretical orientation on first order levels (Coan, 1979; Loesch & McDavis 1978), whereas more recent studies have investigated the integrative processes involved in adopting a theoretical orientation (Murdock et al., 1998). Following a discussion on historic trends in counsellor development and education, this section will examine the studies conducted by Loesch and McDavis (1978) and Murdock et al. (1998).

Trends toward Integration and Eclecticism

A review of the literature revealed that in the field of psychotherapy, the professional had a tendency to align with a singular theoretical model (Halgin, 1985; Loesch & McDavis 1978; Murdock et al. 1998). Brammer and MacDonald (1996) challenged this assertion by suggesting that students in graduate programs assumed that the dividing lines between theoretical orientations were more clearly drawn than they actually were and attempts to ascribe to a particular theory actually proved to be quite limiting.

The problem of ascribing to a single theory, or “therapeutic narrowness” (Halgin, 1985), led psychologists toward promoting models that encouraged therapeutic flexibility and were geared more to meeting clients’ individual needs (Goldfried, 1982; Wachtel, 1977). By the mid-70s several concepts emerged to describe therapeutic movements that stemmed from the need to synthesize therapeutic knowledge, including, “creative synthesis” (Ricks, Wandersman, & Poppen, 1976), “prescriptive eclecticism” (Dimond & Havens, 1975), and “dynamic synthesis” (Murray, 1976). Despite the variety of definitions to describe integrative processes, the terms integration and eclecticism prevailed as the most identifiable ones.

To address trends toward integration, clinical approaches emerged, including Garfield’s Psychotherapy: An Eclectic Approach (1980) and Beutler’s Eclectic Psychotherapy: A Systemic Approach (1983). One of the most influential works in bringing diverging schools of psychotherapies together for a productive dialogue on ways to better serve clients needs was Psychoanalysis and Behaviour Therapy: Towards an Integration (Wachtel, 1977).
To facilitate the process of integration in counsellor and therapist education, Reisman (1975) suggested that universities “provide systems of analysis or a framework by which a multiplicity of theories and methods could be organized into an integrated understanding” (p. 188). Even before this need was formally identified in counsellor education, Brammer (1969) had already presented an organizing system to assist counsellors with this process. Brammer’s work, which introduced the concept of personal theories of counselling, had significant relevance to this study.

**Personal Theories of Counselling**

In addition to learning about established theoretical approaches, Brammer (1969) suggested that counsellors systematically organize their theoretical orientations and practices into a personal theory of helpfulness, “a rationale for what one does in the name of helping” (p. 181). Brammer described a personal theory of counselling as a sophisticated form of common sense, which should contain basic assumptions about how people learn and change, how personality develops, and how motivation is generated (see also Brammer, Abrego & Shostrom, 1993; Brammer & MacDonald, 1996).

Cheston (2000) and Nelson and Neufeldt (1998) presented recent views on theory building that were similar to Brammer’s. Cheston suggested that new counsellors use “a paradigm” to assist them in this integration of theory, so that as they learn about many theories, they can begin to develop “their own personal approach to counselling” (pp. 255-256), and Nelson and Neufeldt suggested that a personal theory of counselling include the organization of values, experiences, and beliefs and knowledge of counselling into a cohesive professional structure, “a partial lens through which to consider the problem along with past personal and professional experiences” (1998, p.82).

Later models of theory building focused more on reconciling divergent philosophies of psychotherapy by promoting critical ways of thinking about practice. The concept of dialectical thinking challenged counsellors to recognize and reconcile dichotomies that present themselves in the myriad of theoretical orientations, so they could “traverse and use the theories without being bound by or caught up in their assumptions or doctrines” (Hanna, Giordano, & Francesca, 1996, p. 2). The goal of dialectical thinking is to develop a paradigm capable of surveying many theories at once,
and tailors this paradigm according to the needs of individual clients. Relevant to the
direction of this study was Hanna et al.'s (1996) observation that the counsellors' and
clients' experiences could be used to connect the many dichotomies present in
counselling theories.

The concept of experience brings the research full circle back to Brammer's
(1969) original assumptions about theory building, that counsellors include their own
experiences in theory building “and get to know themselves well” (as cited in Halgin,
1985, p. 561). Brammer urged therapists to be aware of how personal values, limitations,
and unique style of interactions could be used as a therapeutic tool. Reflection on
personal belief systems is related to much of the research on counsellor values, and in
light of the direction of this study, it was worth examining this in a separate exploration.

Values, Ethics and Experience

Most significant to the direction of this study were Brammer’s and MacDonald’s
(1996) and Nelson’s and Neufeldt’s (1998) recommendations to incorporate reflection on
experiences and values in one's personal theory. Brammer and MacDonald suggested that
personal theories be highly individualistic and “reflective of counsellors’ developmental
attributes and life experiences” (p. 181), and Nelson and Neufeldt suggested that a
personal theory of counselling include the organization of values, experiences, and
beliefs. It appeared that values could not be separated from experience in these
paradigms, and this observation pointed to the notion that values and experiences were
inextricably related (Corey & Callanan, 1998) and could not be addressed separately.

In light of the connection between values and experiences, a focus on how values
impacted theory building could not go unattended in this literature review. In addition to
attending to values, it also seemed logical to extend this discussion to include ethics, as
inextricable connection also existed between values and ethics (Corey & Callanan, 1998).

Whereas values pertain to beliefs and attitudes that provide direction to everyday
living, ethics pertain to the beliefs we hold about what constitutes right conduct (Corey &
Callanan, 1998). In counselling and psychotherapy the two are closely aligned, “the way
counsellors deal with clients’ values can raise ethical issues” (p. 68), particularly with
regard to dealing with clients of culturally diverse backgrounds (Pederson, 1994).
Counsellors’ ways of thinking about people and their circumstances contribute to their ability to be empathic in the counselling relationship and in their ethical practice.

Eugene Kelly (1995) addressed the issue of counsellor values by observing that major values, in conjunction with persisting intentions, operated interactively throughout the counselling process. Kelly believed that a “key context and process variable missing from most process research was counsellor and client’s values” (p. 343), and “further research is needed to clarify how and to what extent such values affect counselling process and outcome” (p. 341).

Corey and Callanan (1998) also reminded us that the question of values permeated the therapeutic process and that counsellors needed to become aware of how their personal values influenced their professional work: “In making ethical decisions, ask yourself these questions: Which values should I rely on? Which values do I hold? What values affect my work with clients? Why do I hold certain values?” (p. 89). In essence, counsellors must “be aware of their own values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours and how these apply in a diverse society” (p. 71).

Professional codes of conduct formalized the use of values by determining the parameters of ethical conduct (CACREP, 1999). The Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) recommended that counsellors should be able to “identify key events in their lives that contributed to the development of their belief systems and explain how these events contributed to values development” (p. 90). It also recommended that counsellors engage in “a self-exploration of their religious, spiritual, and transpersonal beliefs that support or hinder respect and valuing of different belief systems and cultures” (p. 90). In this regard, the research exercise of examining one’s life experiences as related to the development of counselling values could be considered to be good ethical practice (in addition to potentially adding to the body of knowledge on counsellor development!).

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) and Nelson and Neufeldt (1998) asserted that providing opportunities for ongoing reflection offered individuals a chance to understand themselves at a deeper level as counsellors and as people. Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s study revealed that the ability to reflect on personal experience as it relates to one’s
counselling practice was considered “a major indicator of counselor growth across the career lifespan” (p. 507).

In order to understand more fully the potential praxis of personal theory building, values development, and the influence of life experiences, it boded well to incorporate the literature on counsellor development, adult development, and college student development into this portion of the research literature. Granello’s and Hazler’s (1998) theory that linked together commonalities between adult development, college student development and counsellor development were found to be most useful in this context.

**Adult Development, College Student Development and Counsellor Development**

In a qualitative study entitled *Themes in Counsellor Development*, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) examined counsellor development across the career lifespan. Their findings revealed that counsellors progressed through notable developmental stages through all stages of their career. This progress was characterized primarily by a move from an imitation of others to a confidence in self. The study provided one of the primary reference points for the current study, and will be examined in more detail in the relevant studies section of this chapter.

Granello and Hazler (1998) used the findings of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) study to link together commonalities between adult development, college student development, counsellor development, and development from novice to expert, in order to make their case that counsellor education was best addressed in a developmental context. Granello and Hazler theorized that developmental models “have the potential to enhance learning by providing theoretical justification for presenting material in a particular order or with a particular learning style based on the level of counselling graduate student” (p. 90).

According to Granello and Hazler (1998), the adult status of graduate learners placed them in a mode of learning that is unique to this population and highly relevant to the experiences of counselling students. They identified several areas of comparison linking adult development, college student development, counsellor development, and development from novice to expert: (a) move from instructor directed to learner directed; (b) move from didactic instruction to experiential and autonomous learning; (c) move
from a focus on context-free skills to context-based solutions; (d) move from instructor/external evaluation to internal evaluation; (e) move from nonadherence to pretraining skills to integration of self-knowledge into one’s professional life; and (f) move from reliance on techniques to trust in process.

Most relevant to the current study, Granello and Hazler (1998) identified that a hallmark of adult learning was the incorporation of learners’ past experiences into the learning process. “To be effective, adult learning needs to integrate and challenge previous life experiences of the learner.” (p. 92). This premise yields much promise when identifying the relevance of earlier life experience on theory.

Compatible with Granello’s and Hazler’s (1998) view, Woodard and Yii-Nii Lin (1999) also recognized the unique paradigm of the counselling student as adult learner. They proposed that adult learning theory was appropriate for counsellor education as it incorporated “experiential learning components and critical reflection that broadens students perspectives relative to clients and the profession” (p. 142).

Broadening of perspectives was congruent with the concept of transformative development (Merriam & Yang, 1996). The process of transformative development required adult educators to help their students grow beyond the familiar and previously unquestioned to a more uncharted territory of personal and professional development. Similar to transformative development, in the concept of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991) meaning structures are transformed when the individual is confronted with new situations that challenge existing constructs. In both paradigms (transformative development and perspective transformation) the adult learner experiences growth through a process of reconstructing meanings of experiences and self-reflection.

Adult learning theorists identified the importance of understanding this capacity for growth and transformation as part of a unique paradigm of the adult learning experience (Daloz, 1986; Knowles, 1980). Daloz suggested that learning in adulthood resulted in a more differentiated, compassionate, and inclusive worldview, an important observation when considering the needs of counsellor education (Woodward & Yii-Nii Lin, 1999). Woodward and Yii-Nii Lin recommended that adult learning theory be incorporated into counsellor education programs and suggested that pre-practicum methodology be designed to attend to the specific learning attributes of adults.
Spruill and Benshoff, (2000) in part addressed Woodward's and Yii-Nii Lin's (1999) recommendation by presenting a stage model for personal theory building that was designed to “optimize student learning and professional development.” (p. 71). They recognized that beginning counsellors could benefit from a paradigm that integrates personal life experiences and counsellor developmental stages. To address this need, Spruill and Benshoff presented a model of theory development in *Helping Beginning Counsellors to Develop their Personal Theories*. This article was a major inspiration for the inception of this research, and will be addressed in more detail as it relates to this study.

*Helping Beginning Counsellors to Develop Their Personal Theories*

To address the specific problem of “linking theory building to the counsellor development,” Spruill and Benshoff (2000) proposed a three-stage framework for theory building based on Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) three stages of counsellor development (noted in parenthesis).

In phase 1, *personal beliefs* (pretraining), students focus on clarifying their personal beliefs to increase awareness of self and others. This phase involves engagement in introspective activities and encouragement of exploration of beliefs and values. In phase 2, *counselling theories* (training), students study and experiment with different theoretical approaches and begin the process of integrating new external knowledge with self-knowledge. In phase 3, *personal theory of counselling* (post training), students involved in practicum actively practice and attempt to master counselling skills and begin the process of integrating their pretraining, training, and post-training experiences into a personal theory of counselling.

In their discussion and recommendations following the presentation of their theory building model, Spruill and Benshoff (2000) articulated the need for more understanding of the processes involved in integrating the personal and professional self, as well as ways to design more supportive educational environments in which to foster these processes. By asking the question, *Do earlier life experiences influence graduate students’ personal theories of counselling?* this study is poised to address these
recommendations and, by doing so, intends to contribute to the body of knowledge on
the processes involved in theory building and counsellor development.

Relevant Studies

Despite trends toward integration and eclecticism (Feldman, 1985; Friedman, 1981; Gurman, 1981; Kirschner & Kirschner, 1986; Lebow, 1984; Moultrup, 1981; Pinsof, 1984), the prevalence of measures of theoretical orientation indicated the need to continue to focus on identifying theoretical preferences as part of developing and evaluating counsellor training programs.

One of the earlier measures of counsellor orientation, the Counseling Orientation Scale (COS) developed by Loesch and McDavis (1978) assessed counselling orientation preferences on both theoretical and values levels. Murdock et al.’s. (1998) Theoretical Orientation Survey (TOS) later investigated variables that related to counsellors’ theoretical orientation.

In addition to looking at Loesch and McDavis’ (1978) and Murdock et al.’s. (1998) orientation studies, an examination of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) study Themes in Counsellor Development will ensue at the end of this section. Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s study has particular relevance to this study as it focuses extensively on developmental stages of counsellors.

The Counseling Orientation Scale

The Counseling Orientation Scale (COS) assessed counselling orientation preferences on both theoretical and values levels. The seven major counselling orientations used in the assessment were behavioural, client centered, existential, Gestalt, Freudian, rational emotive, and trait-factor.

The COS was initially administered as a field test to 294 students enrolled in graduate-level counsellor education programs at seven southern universities in the United States (109 males and 185 females, mean age 28.4). Sixty-four percent of the participants had completed a counselling theories course or its equivalent. Forty-seven percent (n=138) had completed one or more quarters of practica. The demographic factors considered for analysis were age, gender, ethnicity (ethnic minorities identified only as
Blacks and Hispanics), theories course involvement, and practica involvement. The authors stated that a 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 (sex-by-race-by-theories course-by-practicum) factorial analysis of variance was computed in order to determine if there were significant differences in preferences on the basis of demographic characteristics.

The survey instrument utilized in the study utilized a design similar to a vocational interest inventory. The source pool for the COS component items was a counselling approach orientation comparison grid from Shertzer’s and Stone’s (1974) *Fundamentals of Counselling*. Participants were required to evaluate components of seven theoretical orientations on a scale of 1 to 4 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The process was designed to screen out orientation bias, as preferences for specific orientations were inferred from related component evaluations. For example, a “strongly agree” on the statement “What people are or do is determined by the individual meanings in their lives” (p. 266) gives the respondent a designation correlating with a preference for the existential approach (Frankl, 1967; May, 1983; Yalom, 1981) and client-centered approaches (Rogers, 1995).

The total sample within this study showed a preference for client-centered and Gestalt theories, with existential and Freudian following closely in that order. Interestingly enough, client-centered approaches are still widely popular orientations, and if administered today, the scale might yield a similar result for its top preference. In this regard, the external validity of the COS has in part been demonstrated by the historical and current trends toward preferences for client-centered approaches (Coan, 1979; Finch et al., 1992; Murdock et al, 1998; Prochaska & Norcross, 1983; Tremblay et al., 1986; Warner, 1991).

Comparisons between participant groups revealed no significant differences between theoretical preferences on the basis of gender alone however, an investigation focused on relationships among sub-scales revealed a significant positive relationship between age and preference for the behavioural orientation. Significant positive relationships were also found between the number of hours of practicum experience and preferences for both behavioural and trait and factor orientations.

Loesch and McDavis (1978) presented no assumptions that their findings would be representative of general populations in their area of study but did make claims for the
instrument’s future usefulness. They believed the instrument could be used in assessing preferences both “before and after a segment of training program” (p. 270), helping with matching counsellors to supervisors, and helping with matching counsellors to job settings.

In light of the trends toward integrative and eclectic approaches in psychotherapy (Feldman, 1985; Friedman, 1981; Gurman, 1981; Kirschner & Kirschner, 1986; Lebow, 1984; Moultrup, 1981; Pinsof, 1984), it is important to observe limitations to Loesch’s and McDavis’ study when considering the results for future research. Loesch and McDavis (1978) made the claim that their instrument could be used phenomenologically to illustrate congruence (or lack of it) “between expressed beliefs and counselling behaviours” (p. 270), but their references to counselling behaviours were limited to identifying a single theory of counselling when interpreting the study’s results. When the counsellor subscribed to several approaches, their field test lost its validity. For example, if a respondent who claimed to be a client-centered therapist agreed strongly with the statement “The best way to help people is to aid them in learning new behaviours that bring about desired reactions,” the COS indicated that they were more oriented toward a behavioural approach than a client-centered one. In reality, given the trends toward integration at that time (Goldfried, 1982; Wachtel, 1977), this particular respondent may not have ascribed to any singular theoretical stance at all, and may have been eclectic.

Despite the limitations of the study, the results of the COS yielded some important information regarding preferences for beginning counsellors in the late 1970s that may have relevance to future questions regarding the process of determining theoretical orientation. Most informative and relevant to developmental considerations of theory building were the two positive relationships found between age and experience and the preference for behavioural approaches in the older age category. This particular phenomenon illustrated possible relationships between life experience and practice in the development of the counsellor’s theoretical preference.

Joining the Club: Factors Related to Theoretical Orientation

Murdock et al. (1998) used Coan’s (1979) Theoretical Orientation Survey (TOS) to investigate variables that related to counsellors’ theoretical orientation. Two hundred
and sixty-eight participants were recruited from two training programs in counselling, including both master’s- and doctoral-level students. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 72 years (mean age 35.3). Of the respondents, 74% were female, and 87% were Caucasian. Twenty-three percent of the participants were working for community agencies, 39% were in master’s programs, and 36% were in doctoral programs. Participants ranged in post-degree experience from 0 to 40 years.

Coan’s scale (1979) analyzed theoretical orientation in psychology on eight dimensions that differentiated among the major theories. Participants were required to provide demographic information and select one primary theoretical orientation from a list of eight choices, similar to those presented in the COS: psychoanalytic/neoanalytic, behavioural, cognitive, systems, person-centered, Gestalt, interpersonal, and existential/humanistic. Selection of theoretical orientation followed in the same vein as the Loesch and McDavis (1978) study; global descriptors were deliberately left undefined so that a broad categorization of each orientation resulted. Participants also completed measures of philosophical assumptions, interpersonal style, and level of counsellor development.

Overall, philosophical assumptions, interpersonal control, and theoretical match between respondent and supervisor were best predictors of beginning counsellors’ theoretical orientation. Their results partially supported the need for a developmental approach to supervision, but similar difficulties arose with generalizing the results toward current trends focusing more on integration and eclecticism. The authors stated that they did not include the category of eclectic, as they believed that most counsellors could identify a primary theoretical influence even though they might consider themselves eclectic.

In their discussion, Murdock et al. (1998) surmised that investigating how counsellors negotiated the process of adopting a theoretical orientation was important. They felt that documenting the variables linked to orientation could help to increase awareness of the values and assumptions that influence counsellors’ work with clients and perhaps enable them to become more thoughtful about the consequences of their practice. They were also consistent with Loesch and McDavis (1978) in believing that
understanding these choices would be helpful to counsellor educators and supervisors as they helped students to become professionals.

In their closing remarks, Murdock et al. (1998) suggested that their work be followed with research using methodology that could document in more detail the changes in how counsellors think about and use theory as they gain therapy experience.

**Themes in Counsellor Development**

Skovholt's and Ronnestad's (1992) study of 100 counsellors across the career lifespan (from the first year of graduate school to 40 years beyond graduation), revealed explicit connections between practice and values. Their findings indicated that "there is a strong consistency between ideology—one's values and theoretical stance—and methods and techniques used by the individual" (p. 507). Skovholt's and Ronnestad's study was most pertinent to this research because of the significant relevance of the connections between values development and counselling ideology. It seemed logical to extend these findings to investigate how counsellors' life experiences impacted their values development, and theoretical stance. For the purposes of this research, results of Skovholt's and Ronnestad's study will be used in chapter 5 to validate the findings of this study.

Using a qualitative approach, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) addressed the issues of counsellor development over the span of an average career and extracted a series of primary and secondary themes. The research participants in the study comprised 100 therapists and counsellors from the first year of graduate school to 40 years beyond graduation. The sample, made up of 50 women and 50 men (mean age of 42.4), received graduate training in 34 different universities and 47 graduate programs within these universities.

The data was initially collected using a 23-item questionnaire created by Skovholt and Ronnestad to guide a semi-structured 1- to 1 1/2-hour interview. The data from the study was used to create a set of descriptions based on a three-stage model. The stage descriptions (pretraining, training, and post training) guided a second interview that required participants to respond to the accuracy of these descriptions in terms of how
these concepts fit for them. A narrative analysis was used to extract 20 themes in therapist and counsellor development.

Both the stage model and thematic information gleaned from Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s research held significance for counsellor development on both personal and professional levels. Of the 20 themes identified, 9 had direct relevance to theoretical development, and several of the study’s questionnaire questions were derived from the content revealed in these themes. Due to lengthiness of the results of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s study, this review will focus exclusively on analyzing the themes most relevant to examining beginning counsellors’ experiences and theory building: themes 1, 3, 4, 5, 11, 12, 14, 17, and 20.

Theme 1: Individuation.

Skovholt and Ronnestad suggested that individuation involved an increasingly higher order integration of the professional and personal self in which “there is a strong consistency between ideology—one’s values and theoretical stance—and methods and techniques used by the individual” (p. 507). The “consistency” is delineated by a movement away from an ideological way of functioning to a mode of functioning that is more individuated and founded on “experienced based generalizations” (p. 507). The experiences of the therapist over time, added to accumulated wisdom, enabled the therapist to more freely choose the theoretical framework that formed the basis of professional functioning. Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s observation that “professional development is growth towards individuation” (p. 507) illuminated the potential impact that life experiences have on counsellor identity, as the optimal therapeutic self consists of “a personal blend of the developed professional and personal selves” (p. 507).

Theme 3: Continuous professional reflection.

Identified in this theme was the importance of continuous professional reflection of the impact of “intense professional and personal experience” (p. 509). Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) suggested, “Interpersonal experience in both public and private domains was identified by the participants as being ‘essential in their development’” (p. 509). Examples of such experiences in the public domain included interactions with
clients, supervisors, professors, therapists, and peers, and in the private domain, relationships with one’s children, parents, spouse, and friends.

Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s observation “as the professional matures, continuous professional reflection constitutes the central developmental process” (p. 509) helped to conceptualize the potential importance of life experiences and relationships on counsellor development.

**Theme 4: Reliance on external expertise.**

The premise of this theme “beginning counsellors rely on external expertise; senior practitioners rely on internal expertise” (p. 510) suggested that with time and ongoing practice with clients, experience-based generalizations and accumulated wisdom replaced the use of established context-free theory. The individual’s own unarticulated preconceptualised ideology or “intuition” regarding therapeutic practice formed the basis of professional functioning.

Significant to theory building was Ronnestad’s and Skovholt’s assumption that the prerequisite to operating from articulated wisdom was the acquisition of a core knowledge base of established theories: “From this theory-research base, hundreds of hours of experience produce useful generalizations” (p. 510). This observation was highly relevant to understanding the developmental processes underscoring personal theory building from both educational and experiential perspectives. It illustrated how the combination of engaging in “a highly disciplined and intensive study of the core body of knowledge in the field” (p. 510) and actual experience could provide counsellors with a “parsimonious set of deeper level schemata that can be activated consistently to assist in conceptualizing individual clients” (Cummings, Hallburg, Martin, Slemon, & Hiebert, 1990, p. 132).

**Theme 5: Conceptual systems.**

In theme five Skovholt and Ronnestad identified the development of counsellor identity and the process of “professional individuation” (p. 510). They asserted that with time and experience, the individual gradually becomes more congruent with self as they shed elements of the professional role that are incongruent with their identity. They stated
that “the need for compatibility with self seems to prevail over the need to ascribe to empirically based theory, or theoretical choices in graduate school as the counsellor becomes more professionally individuated” (p. 510). This phenomenon was compatible with an analysis of personal theory development as it illustrated how conceptual systems were potentially impacted by experiences, personality, and cognitive schema.

**Theme 11: Interpersonal encounters.**

When Skovholt and Ronnestad posed questions about the impact of theories and research, they perceived that these factors would be of central importance to counsellor development. In reality, their interviews with counsellors revealed that “relationships with clients, professors, supervisors, peers, colleagues, mentors, and one’s own therapist were more influential than empirically based bodies of knowledge” (p. 512). Clients and professional elders were identified as having major influence, whereas theory and research played a lesser role than predicted. However, Skovholt and Ronnestad pointed out that theory and research are not entirely set aside but were “mediated through these individuals, and in this way, both people and knowledge were of importance” (p. 512).

**Theme 12: Personal life.**

Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s sample repeatedly talked about the impact of life experiences on their work as therapists and counsellors, in essence, “personal life strongly influences professional functioning” (p. 512). Both “normative and difficult life experiences” were considered to be immensely rich sources of information and “were motivational for the work of therapy and counselling” (p. 512). Painful experiences seemed more instructive than successes and achievement experiences, and participants talked particularly about the value they derived from their own distress and loss experiences, such as divorce, death, disability, or loss of meaning and purpose. This notion seemed particularly relevant to understanding how life experiences (conscious and underlying motivations) impacted the development of orientation and practice and formed the basis for this study’s research question and questionnaire topics.

Motivations for entering graduate school and counselling work were also addressed in this section, and Skovholt and Ronnestad suggested that motivation for
entering the profession was most clearly articulated by the graduate students participating in the study. Skovholt and Ronnestad also suggested that motivational concerns might be reflected in the choice of topic for master’s or doctoral thesis.

Theme 14: Importance of professional elders.
Professional elders (i.e., professors, etc.) are extremely important to newer members of the profession and tend to be idealized or devalued. The beginning counsellor wants to learn from, model, and please such individuals, and this admiration was less seen in experienced members of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s sample. Disillusionment with professors and programs was also observed by beginning counsellors, and members of the sample also cited feeling unprepared for what was required of them post graduation.

Theme 17: Modeling and imitation.
In the early years of professional development, the counsellor is absorbed with watching and imitating other experts (experts defined as writers of major theoretical approaches, or techniques, respected local practitioners, professors, or supervisors). Skovholt and Ronnestad suggested “the search for experts to imitate takes on greater salience early in one’s professional development” (p. 513). As experience develops, practitioners moved beyond rote imitation to selective identification as counsellors become more focused on expanding, clarifying, and elaborating on their own style.

Theme 20: Experience with suffering.
As an adjunct to theme 12, Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s observation that “extensive experience with suffering produces heightened tolerance and acceptance of human variability” (p. 514) emphasized the potential role of life experience on counsellor development and practice. Skovholt and Ronnestad suggested that their findings indicated, “the personal life of the therapist-counsellor is instructive, and through the process of living one’s life as an adult, a variety of experiences, including personal disappointments and choices, help to make the individual less judgmental of others” (p. 514). In relation to how life experiences impact personal theory building, this observation
once again provided the framework for continuing to investigate how life experiences influenced one’s professional paradigms.

**Summary and Restatement of the Problem**

In the early 70’s orientation scales used to assess theoretical preferences to help address counsellor trainees’ needs. Shortly after this period, a shift from globally assessing preferences to understanding underlying factors influencing these theoretical choices emerged. Concurrently, integrative practices were also making their mark, and organizing paradigms emerged to address this movement. By the late 80s, graduate programs in counsellor education also began attending to counsellor development as part of understanding how best to design training programs.

Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) research on counsellor development came relatively close to addressing the developmental processes of beginning counsellors, as their findings revealed that counsellors progressed through notable developmental stages through all phases of their career. Drawing upon Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s work, Spruill and Benshoff (2000) presented a model for incorporating counsellor development into theory building.

Identifying connections between personal theory building and one’s developmental influences and life experiences is by no means an original insight. As early as 1969, Brammer suggested that “Each helper must develop his or her own style and theory of helping, because each person has had different life experiences and has different ways of looking at people” (1985, p. 180). The purpose of the present study was to use this rich history behind theory building and counsellor development to further examine the impact of life influences on beginning counsellors’ personal theories.

In the following chapter, the methodology section presents the philosophical assumptions and perspectives of the qualitative and phenomenological orientation. In addition, the specific research procedures and practices used in this study will be presented.
Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

This study examined the potential influence of earlier life experiences on the development of beginning counsellors' personal theories of counselling. The development of a personal theory is a central aspect of counsellor education. The major aim of this research was to gain a further understanding of how life experience intersected with the process of personal theory building.

In this chapter, the methodology section describes the philosophical assumptions and perspectives of the phenomenological orientation used in this study. The methods section describes the specific research procedures used to conduct this investigation.

Methodology

A qualitative approach, using a phenomenological design, was chosen to enlarge the body of knowledge related to beginning counsellor development and personal theory building. Qualitative research was selected because it emphasizes a naturalistic approach to research (Walker, 1981) that seeks to understand and describe phenomena from the perspective of those who experience and understand it (Patton, 1991). This section presents an overview of qualitative and phenomenological research, and describes its particular relevance to the research investigation.

Overview of Qualitative Research

Stake (1995) aptly described the function of qualitative research as not "necessarily to conquer the world, but to sophisticate the beholding of it" (p. 43). Qualitative research is concerned with the meaning making of those in social situations (Greene, 1988) and of "lived experiences" (Van Manen, 1990). In other words, it is guided by questions generated from real world experiences and observations (Whitt, 1991).

Anderson and Arsenault (1998) reminded us that "Qualitative research is an inductive form of inquiry whose results are a blend of research skill, luck and a particular perspective" (p. 119), and the success of qualitative research is contingent on the researcher's ability to implement skilfully the research methodologies. The researcher's
Perspective will have a great influence on the findings, and a hallmark of qualitative research is the researcher's own creative involvement (Tesch, 1990). Tesch further pointed out that although creativity may play an important role in the analysis, the process also needs to be systematic and comprehensive without being rigid.

Participant and researcher's roles.

According to Patton (1990), the qualitative researcher's primary ontological stance is that reality is created by the individual, and interpersonal constructions and meaning making activities are of primary importance in conceptualizing human conduct. It is individuals themselves who are at the heart of the meaning making process.

Participants' tacit knowledge is highly valued in qualitative research and occupies an honoured role in the feminist paradigm. The research participant is identified as "the one who has the experience, and who is willing to share his or her understanding of that experience with researchers" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 352), and the participant is considered to be the "expert" on their own processes as well as an important collaborator on the inquiry (Neimeyer, 1995).

The researcher's own close involvement with the phenomena under inquiry creates an opportunity for personal growth during the investigation and "deepens their self-understanding in the course of the research" (Smith, 1991, p. 198). Smith's statement seems appropriate in the context of researching developmental and life influences.

The value of qualitative approaches in understanding graduate student experiences.

Contrary to the positivist view, which uses numbers to represent student behaviour, qualitative research uses "words to describe the student experience" (Kuh & Andreas, 1991, p. 398). According to Whitt (1991), the human experience in this paradigm represents many diverse viewpoints, and positivist research methods may not be sufficient to measure students' multiplicity. Qualitative research emphasizes the complexity of human behaviours and is recognized as having advantages in its capacity to understand student experiences, particularly developmental and experiential attributes.
of individuals and graduate students (Kuh & Andreas, 1991; Manning, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Morgan, 1986).

Although it may not be possible to address the myriad of cultural factors in graduate student populations, it is possible to reflect on the significance of context in the complexity and diversity of students' experiences. Whitt (1991) suggested that researchers include contextual factors in the conceptualization of students' experiences, as it helps to "understand how students use and count on a background of meanings for their own interpretations and actions" (p. 407). Whitt's observation is particularly relevant when reflecting upon the direction of this study and the research question: Do earlier life experiences influence graduate students' personal theories of counselling?

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the contextual paradigm that frames the investigation requires the researcher to have a clear understanding of both the environment that holds the phenomena—graduate programs in counselling—and the conceptual interests being studied—the influence of earlier life experiences on personal theory building.

In order to address beginning counselling's "meaning making" processes in the context of their life experiences, it seemed appropriate to use a phenomenological approach for this study. The following section will examine the specific attributes of the phenomenological approach and their application in this research.

**Phenomenological Research**

Anderson and Arsenault (1998) stated that phenomenological research seeks to locate the meanings people place on events and structures around them. According to Van Manen (1990), phenomenology is both descriptive, in that it allows things to "speak for themselves" (p. 180), and it is interpretive. Heidegger (1972) identified that language was the primary vehicle for the interpretation of observed phenomena, as he suggested that the facts of lived experiences needed to be captured in language which is an interpretive process.

Heidegger's (1972) observation that language was the primary vehicle for the interpretation of observed phenomena highlights the paradox that exists in phenomenological research-- that one is attempting to observe things as they really are
without preconception (Hycner, 1985). Since the selection and usage of language implies a preconception of sorts is at work, a dilemma emerges when utilizing this research lens. In part this dilemma is resolved through the rigorous use of bracketing which is described in the following section.

Bias and bracketing.

Hycner (1985), the founder of modern day phenomenology, explained that a phenomenological approach to data analysis begins with the researcher approaching the data with an attitude of openness "to enter into the unique world of the participant so as to study human experience in its purest form without preconceived notions or everyday biases or beliefs" (as cited in Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 600). Hycner suggested that in order to remain fully open to the findings, the researcher must "bracket" any preconceived notions about the phenomenon under investigation so as to be able to examine without bias. Almost in contradiction to the attempt to examine purely and without bias, is the phenomenological researcher's stance that their own vantage point be openly acknowledged at all stages of the research process (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998).

The process of bracketing requires the investigator to resolve to identify all prior assumptions about the nature of the thing being studied (Ashworth, 1996). Prior assumptions, including theories, research presuppositions, ready-made interpretations, personal knowledge, and beliefs, are bracketed and openly acknowledged "in order to reveal engaged lived experience" (p. 1). In short, researchers must be familiar enough with their own expectations, values, and assumptions, to be aware of how "prior knowledge might bias the events being observed" (Patton, 1990, p. 240).

In light of the importance of maintaining scientific credibility, the process of bracketing can be construed as a difficult if not impossible task. Giorgi (1985) illuminated the investigator's dilemma with bracketing and presented subsequent solutions:

In what sense can I still be guided by phenomenology and science while I still bracket them? The answer is that I accept the demand to be phenomenological and scientific in general. And approach the phenomenon one is interested in investigating in a methodical, systematic, and rigorous way . . . The concrete steps
are specified and worked out in dialogue with the phenomenon rather than beforehand. This is simply applying the phenomenological procedure of bracketing to the question of method. (p. 26).

*Limitations of the phenomenological research design*

The human experience is of a highly mutable nature, and one study alone cannot encompass the whole picture of the phenomenon under investigation (Tesch, 1990). Because of the subjective nature of the qualitative methodology, there are obvious limitations to generalisability. Random selection of participants is not always an option or even desired in qualitative research that poses problems of N sizes and the influence of demographic characteristics (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). As participants are often selected for specific attributes, as in the case of this study, the qualitative research approach doesn't tend to have much generalizable power. The internal and external validity of qualitative research is highly contingent upon the researcher’s skills and ability to apply the methodology (Anderson & Arsenault). Scott (1991) stated this clearly in his observation that scientific rigor lies in the “soundness with which a given method is applied” (p. 421).

Tests of validity and reliability are not externally imposed on the qualitative research process, but are embedded inside it. Manning (1992) and Anderson and Arsenault (1998) concurred that generalisability or transferability (applications of the findings to other groups of people) is not considered a fundamental component of qualitative methodology, given that the research is context bound. Marshall and Rossman (1995) addressed the issue of transferability by suggesting that the subsequent researcher determine the applicability of one set of findings to another. Use of the existing findings, not the discovery of new findings, becomes the main focus of transferability.

The issue of transferability or generalisability in qualitative research is an interesting one because commonalities of the human experience do not go unnoticed by those studying social sciences. The potential for some degree of external validity in qualitative research needs always to remain a possibility, as it creates a common language by which to describe experiences.
Methods

This methods section, which is divided into three subsections, will present the actual methods used in the research. Section one addresses issues of internal and external validity, selection of instrumentation, and sampling decisions/reruitment of participants. Section two describes data collection procedures, and section three will present the data analysis process and conclude the chapter.

Internal Validity

Several measures were taken to strengthen the current study’s internal validity (Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Miles & Huberman, 1994). These measures, which will be described below, were as follows: (a) systematic and orderly research methodology, (b) external audit, (c) review of the literature, and (d) a chain of evidence maintained.

(a) A systematic and orderly research methodology was designed so that the line of reasoning remained consistent and traceable throughout. Research methods were logical and orderly, following systematic protocols established by experts in phenomenological research. Specific procedures were selected after extensive investigation into current research describing qualitative research methodology. Procedures were chosen based on their consistency with the needs of the research question, “Do earlier life experiences influence graduate students’ personal theories of counselling?” and the clarity of their lines of reasoning.

(b) External auditors comprising of peers and participants, were used to review different aspects of the research throughout the process. In the initial stages of designing the study, several of my colleagues were recruited to examine and pilot the questionnaire. They provided me with feedback on its construction and utility, and I found their input invaluable in creating the final product. In addition to my peers, member checking was done with participants to “bracket” out and identify personal biases and experiences that may have influenced the research (Moustakas, 1996) and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Scott, 1991; Van Maanen, 1979).

(c) A thorough review of the literature created a cohesive theoretical paradigm in which to conceptualize findings. I undertook an extensive investigation of the literature to
survey the lines of research relevant to the development of theoretical orientation and counsellor development. The intent was to use concurring conceptual strands of the literature to set the stage for the parameters and the work of the study. The literature review was rich enough to create a plausible synthesis for the exploration of how life experiences influence graduate students’ personal theories of counselling and provided a paradigm for discussing emergent themes as related to existing bodies of knowledge.

(d) Written notes were regularly maintained as a chain of evidence through a meticulous audit of all my personal and theoretical insights (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). The process of recording my thoughts in a journal or Field Journal (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998), did not attempt to eliminate my bias, but was used to identify and set aside all prior assumptions about how earlier life experiences influenced personal theory. The journal also contained a section about how research decisions were made (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998).

In addition to maintaining reflections on personal and pragmatic decisions I incorporated a theoretical component in the journal. In this section, I included a copy of my own personal theory of counselling, written in 1999. This document proved valuable in the analysis of the findings, as prior assumptions about theory and theory building were easily cross-referenced.

External Validity/Transferability

Two measures were taken to strengthen the study’s external validity (Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Miles & Huberman, 1994). These measures were as follows: (a) triangulation of multiple data sources (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998) and (b) member checking with participants.

(a) Anderson and Arsenault (1998) pointed out that qualitative analysis relies heavily on the use of multiple data sources, data collection methods, and theories, to validate research findings. “Triangulation” of data sources safeguards validity by providing opportunities for various sources of data to point in the same direction relative to a given conclusion. Triangulation can also help to eliminate researcher bias and assists with the detection of errors or anomalies in the findings (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998).
The data for the study was triangulated from three different sources: the written responses on the questionnaire, the transcripts of the audio taped individual interviews, and the researcher’s own personal and theoretical reflections, as documented in field notes (Patton, 1990).

(b) Member checking was also done with subjects to “bracket” out and identify personal biases and experiences that influenced the direction of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Moustakas, 1996; Scott, 1991; Van Maanen, 1979). Participants were asked to review the accuracy of the raw data and were offered ongoing opportunities to peruse unfinished sections of the thematic analysis and summary of findings.

Instrumentation

Data for this study was triangulated from three sources: 1) Questionnaire; 2) Individual interview; and; 3) Process journal. This section will describe these instruments and the philosophy behind their selection and use in this study.

Questionnaires.

The questionnaire is a highly efficient instrument for routine data collection and can elicit individual comments and perspectives in the respondents “own words” (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 168). The questionnaire can also be a useful adjunct to interviewing to provide a direction or starting point for discussion, as was the case in this study.

The purpose of the questionnaire used in this study was threefold: (a) to gather contextual data to describe the sample being studied, (b) to provide verbatim information regarding participants’ experiences, and (c) to provide a starting point and guiding questions for the individual interview.

The first section of the questionnaire was designed to gather contextual data from the participants in order to develop an overall picture of their life profile as students and beginning counsellors. The following information was requested in this section: (a) age, (b) undergraduate degree(s)/major(s), (c) year(s) in master’s program, (d) practicum hours (approx.), (e) years of professional counselling experience, (f) primary theoretical orientation(s).
The second section of the questionnaire contained a list of five process-oriented questions that were to be answered in a narrative fashion. (See sample of questionnaire in Appendix C). In looking at understanding the conscious and underlying motivations behind counsellors’ initial selection and design of theoretical orientation, I opted to narrow the focus of the research questions to exploring life experiences prior to entering graduate school. I assumed that connections between personal theory development and participation in the Master’s in Counselling program were already clearly articulated, and would yield less relevant information in the context of this study. The following questions (each optional) were included on the questionnaire:

1. Have your earlier life experiences (i.e., significant events, losses, family of origin influences, life transitions etc.) influenced in any way the development of your personal theory of counselling? If so, describe any specific experience(s) that influenced your theory.

2. Were there any persons or groups of persons who influenced the development of your personal theory of counselling? If so describe how these persons or groups of persons influenced the development of your personal theory.

Questions 1 and 2, directly aligned to the phenomenon under investigation and were intended to generate a narrative of earlier life experiences including events, experience, and relationships. As predicted, the responses to these two questions yielded most of the information used in the analysis.

3. Have any of your earlier “non-counselling” related career experiences (i.e., teaching, management, sales, etc.), influenced the development of your personal theory? If so, please describe these experiences and their connections to your personal theory.

This question was designed to gain an understanding of some of the less obvious influences that may have impacted theory building.

4. Have your earlier experiences as a client influenced the development of your personal theory? If so please describe how these experiences influenced the development of your personal theory?

The purpose of this question was to have participants reflect on their experiences on the receiving end of theory.
5. Do you believe your personal theory of counselling reflects your personality style, hobbies, interests, etc.? If so, please describe.

The aim of question 5 was to have participants reflect on the non-relational influences emanating from an emic (internal, or from within) perspective. It was hoped that this question would yield some unexpected relationships between theory development and participants’ ways of being and perceiving the world.

*Individual interviews.*

Interviews allow the researcher to learn and understand the meanings people make of their everyday activities and how these impact thoughts and feelings (Weiss, 1994). According to Patton (1991), this approach to data collection provides a thorough description of what people know in the situations that they themselves create.

Two primary questions guided the individual interview:
1. If earlier life experiences influenced your personal theory of counselling, which events/experiences were most influential and why?
2. Which persons or groups of persons were most influential to developing your personal theory of counselling and why?

*Field notes / process journal.*

Phenomenological research requires that the researcher be familiar enough with their own expectations, values, and assumptions to be aware of how “prior knowledge might bias the events being observed” (Patton, 1991, p. 240). As an extension of this expectation, it would seem highly appropriate for the researcher to take on a participatory role in the research to identify accurately and “bracket” out personal biases and experiences that may influence the research (Moustakas, 1996). The use of field notes provides a practical method for researchers to formally document their own experiences and insights on the research process. Field notes contain “a variety of information about self and method” (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, p. 327) including a detailed and descriptive record of the research process and personal reflections (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). Patton (1990) considered field notes to be an indispensable data source that should include a written comment of everything the researcher finds significant or worthwhile.
Sampling Decisions and Recruitment of Participants

Criterion sampling was used to select participants for the research. Each participant was to be a graduate student enrolled in any year of the Master's in Counselling program, including up to two years post graduation. Participants had to have completed a theories of counselling course at the graduate level and developed their own personal theory of counselling as part of this course.

Due to the diverse nature of students enrolled in counselling programs, gender was not targeted as a criterion for participation. The low ratio of males to females traditionally seen in the Master's in Counselling program (more females to males), made it difficult to get an equitable gender distribution.

The seven participants for this study were made up of 5 graduate students, and 2 recent postgraduates from a Master's in Counselling program located in a Pacific Northwestern University. The Coordinator of the graduate counselling program at the university was contacted for permission to recruit participants for the study.

Recruitment notices (see Appendix A) were also posted in well-frequented areas in the faculty and sent via electronic mail to students currently enrolled in the program, as well as to recent graduates. The recruitment notice described the study in general, and described participant criteria (graduate student in any year of the Master's in Counselling program including 2 years post graduation, have completed a theories course and have developed a personal theory of counselling). The notices directed interested students to contact me by phone or email if they wished to participate in my study.

During my conversations with interested participants, I outlined the purpose of the study and explained how their contributions would fit with my research objectives. I also described the nature of their participation as to what would be involved. I explained that I would be looking at the impact of life experiences (prior to entering the Master's in Counselling program), on personal theory development. If individuals indicated continued interest and availability, I gave them a copy of the participant consent form for their perusal and signature (see Appendix B). The consent form outlined in detail all aspects of participation and methods utilized to secure anonymity.
**Data Collection Procedures**

The data for the study were collected from three different sources: 1) the written responses on the questionnaire, 2) the transcripts of the audio taped individual interviews, and 3) the researcher's own personal and theoretical reflections, as documented in field notes (Patton, 1990). This section describes the steps taken to complete the research.

1) **Completing the questionnaire.**

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire entitled “Looking at the Influence of Earlier Life Experiences on the Development of your Personal Theory of Counselling”. The questionnaires were distributed to each of the participants prior to the individual interviews, and I went over the questions with them. I also reminded participants that I was looking at experiences prior to entering the graduate program. Participants were asked to spend no more than one hour answering the questions. If the participants had any questions regarding the material presented in the questionnaire, they were invited to contact me.

The data from the questionnaires was not to be used unless the participant agreed to be involved in both phases of the research (questionnaire and interview), and the participants retained the completed questionnaires until the actual interviews, so that if desired, they could refer to them during the discussion. Following these discussions I collected the questionnaires.

2) **Conducting the individual interviews / audiotaping.**

After completing the questionnaires, participants were given appointments to participate in a follow-up interview. In the interviews participants reviewed their responses to the questionnaire with me, and then were interviewed about how their earlier life experiences may have influenced the development of their personal theory of counselling. All 7 participants were interviewed individually over a span of four to eight weeks, and each interview lasted for approximately 40 to 60 minutes, with a 30-minute period available for debriefing afterwards.

During the initial period of the interview, careful attention was paid to fostering an atmosphere of trust and comfort before proceeding and restating the general objectives
of the study. An explanation of the use of pseudonyms clarified to participants that their identities would remain protected throughout the study. Participants were also informed that any records of their real names would be separated from all other research data. The discussion was guided by two open-ended questions that were designed to expand on the questions already presented in the questionnaire.

Guiding questions used in the interviewing process were open ended and focused on eliciting perceptions rather than factual information. The goal of the interview process was to remain flexible enough to address and expand upon the primary characteristics and themes revealed in the questionnaire while still providing space to honour new insights.

Issues chosen for in-depth exploration were selected according to what the participants found relevant or meaningful to them. Issues were deemed salient if participants showed clear verbal, affectual, or physical indicators of their significance. For example, a change in the quality or intensity of a participant's vocal expression or change in body language was indicative of a high interest in the content (McIsaac, 2000).

To facilitate the transcription process, individual interviews were audio taped. The audiotape format also allowed me to recall the content of the interview in a holistic fashion, enabling attention to innuendoes of vocal variance. Participants were invited to pause or turn off the recording devices at any point they wished during the data collection process. They were encouraged to reflect on the content in an open and empathic forum throughout both the recorded and non-recorded portions of the process. At the end of each interview session, participants were invited to contact me with any further insights regarding issues raised in the interviews.

The audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and any material identifying the participants and their associates was edited out. Participants were offered ongoing opportunities to proofread and make any changes (deletions or additions) to interview transcripts, and rough copies of the thematic analysis and summary of findings. 3) Maintaining a field journal.

In addition to participant involvement, data was collected by means of a Field Journal. As a graduate student, and beginning counsellor, being an actual participant in the research was unavoidable, and using a field journal assisted me with sifting and
sorting through what I brought to the research and what it brought to me. I kept a soft covered notebook with me at all times when in contact with participants and the research setting. In this journal I recorded two types of field notes: (a) *personal notes*—personal reflections regarding the research process, how decisions were made, preliminary ideas about emerging themes; and (b) *theoretical notes*—an acknowledgement of my theoretical positions that included a copy of my own “personal theory of counselling” written in 1999.

My personal theories of counselling document proved valuable in the analysis of the findings, as prior assumptions about theory and theory building were easily cross-referenced and “bracketed” (Hycner, 1985). Throughout the research process I periodically revisited this document to assess primary areas of influence. It was evident early in the research process that my own theory of counselling held many assumptions and that I needed to clarify which elements of my theory were being brought to the research. This was not in an effort to curb my enthusiasm, but to simply identify to the reader areas in need of bracketing. I used my field notebook to journal about these assumptions and how they influenced the direction of the research. In one journal entry I wrote, “My enthusiasm and personal views on theory building interfered far more than I expected in the interviews.”

*Data Analysis*

Marshall and Rossman (1995) suggested that the goal of data analysis is to identify clear and consistent patterns of a phenomenon. Analyzing qualitative data requires the researcher to organize the data into manageable units, combine and synthesize ideas, develop themes, patterns or theories, and illuminate important discoveries of the research (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). In order to identify patterns of graduate students’ experiences of creating a personal theory of counselling, my analytic perspective remained embedded in a constructivist paradigm.

The constructivist paradigm supports phenomenological research by remaining responsive to the potentially evolving nature of any meanings and patterns that emerge during the research process. The process of categorization and analysis is a continuous
and evolving one, and the research is never really finished “until the last computer printout” (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 131).

Once gathered, meanings and patterns are divided into relevant and meaningful themes that maintain a holistic connection between them (Tesch, 1990). Any modes of organization and coding are derived from the data itself, and categories for sorting initially remain tentative and flexible, until obvious categories for sorting present themselves (Tesch, 1990). Giorgi (1985) cautioned researchers never to lose sight of the phenomenon under investigation in the process of looking for categories. He also recommended re-reading the text with the more specific aim of discriminating “meaning units from within a psychological perspective” (p. 10).

Giorgi (1985) advised that researchers maintain a focus on the phenomenon being researched throughout this process of extracting themes. As a researcher, I found it challenging to balance the process of maintaining a focus on the question, “Do earlier life experiences influence graduate students’ personal theories of counselling?” while still allowing the participants’ narratives to evolve naturally into themes. Upon first reading the questionnaires, I realized how easy it was to lose sight of using an objective approach to this dilemma, as my own close involvement with the research question triggered automatic thoughts about how to interpret these narratives. I was grateful to have a system of analysis that enabled me to detach myself from the research data enough to extract themes objectively. For this process, I used a creative synthesis of methodologies as described in the following section.

**Thematic analysis.**

The process of analyzing text begins when the researcher codes the data (Creswell, 2002; Tesch, 1990). Tesch recognized that organizing and coding data in qualitative research is the most time consuming and scientific portion of the data analysis, and “there is no one right way” (p. 96). Tesch also reminded us that there is room for “researcher creativity,” and “each qualitative analyst must find his or her own process” (p. 96) in manipulating qualitative data.

Coding involves segmenting and labelling text into units of meaning in order to form descriptions and broad themes (Creswell, 2002; Giorgi, 1985). To be effective and
time efficient, the coding process requires some form of systematic guidance, although there is no "definite procedure" (Creswell 2002, p. 266).

A sequential process is typically involved in extracting meaning units and coding data and Tesch (1990), Creswell (2002) and Giorgi (1985) present conceptually similar approaches to this process. I opted to draw upon parts of each of their models, in particular Creswell's, for the purposes of this study's analysis. This model, which collapsed and combined these authors' suggestions is as follows:

1. Initially read through the text data.
2. Divide the text data into segments of information. Label the segments of information with codes/meaning units.
3. Reduce overlap and redundancy, collapse codes into 4 to 7 themes.
4. Construct a narrative to describe the themes.
5. Construct a narrative description of the findings. Citing appropriate references, describe themes utilizing the language most revelatory of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

The following is a full description of each of the stages as applied to the thematic analysis:

1. All of the raw data (completed questionnaires and transcripts) was carefully read to get an overall sense of meanings and familiarity with the content. Initial ideas were written in the right hand margins of the transcripts and questionnaires as they came to mind.

2. Once the sense of the whole was grasped, the text was re-read with the more specific aim of discriminating "meaning units" that focused on the phenomenon being researched. A "meaning unit" may be a word, a phrase, or even a whole paragraph, but in itself there is a distinct meaning, and there is a meaning in relation to the phenomenon being studied (Giorgi, 1985; Hycner, 1985).

Extracting meaning units was accomplished by identifying and placing in brackets any text segments that directly related to the research question and, beside each bracketed text segment, ascribing a word or phrase that best captured the text segment's meaning.
Meanings were written in the left-hand margin of the page. For example, if a subject stated, "When I was a child, my parents helped me to notice oppression," the meaning unit or codes "modeling and imitation" or "family of origin" was ascribed.

Once I had finished organizing all of the raw data into meaning units, I recruited a graduate student to assist me with validating the codes that I had assigned to each section. This process was in place so as to ensure inter-rater reliability of categorizations from participants' perspective.

The inter-rater was familiar with both Tesch (1990) and Giorgi's (1985) models of thematic analysis. Prior to our work together I introduced her to Cresswell's (2002) model so as to align our approaches to the methodology.

After the inter-rater had read over all of the raw data--questionnaires and interview transcripts, we held a series of meetings to share our perspectives regarding categorizations that could be derived from the raw data. The discussions revealed no significant discrepancies in our ideas for categorizations and we were in 100 percent agreement that the meaning units I had originally assigned reflected the data accurately enough and should remain unchanged. We also agreed that it was not necessary to assign any further meaning units to this portion of analysis.

3. Once meaning units were delineated, the segmented text was re-read thoroughly for redundancies and possible meaning combinations or themes. Themes were taken from consistent statements regarding the subjects’ experience that were created by clustering meaning units according to degrees of similarities and prevalence in the total sample (Giorgi, 1985; Tesch, 1990). I extracted themes by identifying both essential and incidental meaning units (Giorgi, 1985), for example, "When I was a child, my parents helped me to notice oppression," related to the statement, "My parents’ own experiences with being minorities led them to model respect for values and beliefs of other cultures," resulted in the theme "values, beliefs, and culture."

At all stages of the coding process I remained "fully open to revising the division of categories and themes until fully satisfied with the congruence of the data and the organizing system" (Tesch, 1990, p. 91). In this model the questionnaire items, and interview questions were not used as organizing paradigms and did not result in the
creation of the study's headings, instead headings were derived from the language of the data itself (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Due to the small N size in this study, it was not always possible to substantiate thematic findings with all seven participants. In two cases I chose to profile a theme that was supported by 6 out of 7 participants as I felt it was relevant to the direction of the research.

To ensure that I had organized the data with exclusive regard to the themes that participants actually generated, subjects were asked to review categorizations and offer any insights toward revision (see Appendix E). It was hoped that this approach would ensure that data segments, codes, and code categories were generated from an emic perspective that revealed their experiences accurately (Whitt, 1991). Drafts of transcripts and themes related to their interviews were available to participants at all stages of the research (see Appendix E), and in keeping with the constructivist and phenomenological paradigms, researcher and participants were invited to remain "co-investigators" throughout the process (Moustakas, 1996; Neimeyer, 1995). Steps one to three remained a work in progress until all the information had been dissected and categorized.

4. The ultimate goal of the data analysis is to transform meaning units and subsequent themes into textural descriptions of the phenomenon as it is construed through the perception, beliefs, and judgments of the participants (Giorgi, 1985). Marshall and Rossman (1995) described this phase of research as "the most difficult, complex, and creative phase of data analysis" (p. 114). The description can be expressed "on a number of levels" (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10), and there is no set form on constructing the final description or "narrative" (Creswell, 2002, p. 274). Creswell identified some frequently used protocols to address the research question in a narrative format, including: (a) Identify dialogue and quotes that provide support for themes; (b) Use metaphors and analogies; (c) Locate multiple perspectives and identify these perspectives based on different individuals, sources of information, and multiple views held by one person; and (d) Look for vivid detail and description of individuals, events, and activities. I utilized these suggestions to construct chapter four, the thematic analysis, and in addition to using Cresswell's (2000) suggestions for the narrative development, I borrowed elements of
Bogden’s and Biklen’s (1998) three-dimensional model for analyzing the participants’ perspectives.

Bogden’s and Biklen’s (1998) three dimensions of data analysis provided me with a useful set of lenses and assisted with organizing the results into coherent themes. *Dimension one* described participants’ lives, and current and historic life contexts, and how they see themselves in relation to their lives; *dimension two* examined perspectives held by participants, ways of thinking about setting, people, and objects (e.g., practice); and *dimension three* examined the specific events and relationships that occurred in the participants’ lives that influenced their ways of thinking about people and practice. These three dimensions of data analysis were highly useful in organizing the results, as they provided me with a set of lenses for the analysis. This stage of analysis resulted in the creation of two primary headings in which to present the themes in chapter four, *Ways of Thinking About People,* and *Ways of Thinking About Practice.*

5. The final stage of coding involved revisiting themes and expanding them to encompass themes *most* revelatory of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Giorgi, 1985). Using Giorgi’s suggestion, I went through all of the meaning units extracted and expressed the psychological insight contained in them more directly and scientifically to display the findings. This involved using the language and terminology of the discipline under consideration, and entering into a systematic analysis of the meaning units, or themes as contrasted to the research literature. The primary body of literature selected for this phase of analysis was Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) study *Themes in Counsellor Development.* This brought the process into chapter 4 Discussion of Themes and Summary of Findings.

**Summary**

In this chapter, the methodology section described the philosophical assumptions and specific procedures utilized in this study. A qualitative approach using a phenomenological design was chosen to conduct the research.

In chapter 4, seven Master’s in counselling students are profiled using a thematic analysis of their responses to the questionnaires and individual interviews. Cresswell’s six stages of thematic analysis were applied to the participants’ questionnaires and
transcripts of their interviews. The thematic results will be discussed in the context of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s study (1992) *Themes in Counsellor Development*, and the chapter will conclude with a summary of findings.
Chapter 4: Discussion of Themes and Summary of Findings

The first section of Chapter 4 reintroduces the study’s research questions and profiles the seven participants. This will be followed with a discussion on personal theories of counselling. I chose to add this discussion because of the strong relationship between participants’ responses and the components of a personal theory of counselling. These components had a major influence on the identification of themes that emerged in the study.

The second section of this chapter presents the thematic analysis of the 7 participants’ responses to the study’s research questions. Snapshots of their stories are offered through an organization of their collective voices into the 5 common themes, (1) Becoming a counsellor: the roots of empathy, (2) Values development, (3) Culture and diversity, (4) Understanding Therapeutic Change, and (5) Style and Techniques of Treatment.

The third section of chapter 4 presents a discussion of the research findings in the context of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s study (1992) Themes in Counsellor Development. The discussion, which is divided into two parts, presents an analysis of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s themes (1, 3, 4, 5, 11, 12, 14, 17, and 20) as related to the results of this study.

The final section of this chapter presents the summary of the research findings and conclusions.

The Questions

A questionnaire and interview was the primary format used to address the research question: Do earlier life experiences influence graduate students’ personal theories of counselling? In the questionnaire, five optional questions were asked, and in the individual interviews, two questions were posed to participants. The analysis of results revealed that in addition to answering the interview questions, which was, of course, mandatory, participants unanimously focused on questions 1, 2, and 4 on the questionnaires. The thematic analysis is based on the responses to questions posed in both the individual interviews and questionnaires.
All seven participants affirmatively answered and elaborated on questions 1 and 2 on the questionnaire, six out of seven participants responded in detail to question 4, and four out of the seven participants responded in detail to questions 3 and 5. At this juncture, it is worth reviewing the questionnaire and the interview questions.

1. Have your earlier life experiences (e.g., significant events, losses, family of origin influences, life transitions, etc.) influenced in any way the development of your personal theory of counselling? If so, describe any specific experience(s) that influenced your theory.

2. Were there any persons or groups of persons who influenced the development of your personal theory of counselling? If so, describe how these persons or groups of persons influenced the development of your personal theory.

3. Have your earlier experiences as a client influenced the development of your personal theory? If so, please describe how these experiences influenced the development of your personal theory.

4. Have your earlier experiences as a client influenced the development of your personal theory? If so please describe how these experiences influenced the development of your personal theory?

5. Do you believe your personal theory of counselling reflects your personality style, hobbies, interests, etc.? If so, please describe.

The questions posed in the individual interviews basically paraphrased questions one and two and required participants to elaborate on their responses to them on the questionnaires.

1. If earlier life experiences influenced your personal theory of counselling, which events/experiences were most influential and why?

2. Which persons or groups of persons were most influential in developing your personal theory of counselling and why?

Profile of Participants

The seven participants in this study were men and women between the ages of 29 and 53 who were currently enrolled or recent graduates (within the past two years) of a master’s in counselling program at a university located in the Pacific Northwest. Two
were in year one of the master’s program, three were in their second and third years, and two had graduated within the past two years. All participants had completed a theories of counselling course and created their own personal theory of counselling document. All seven participants still had access to this document.

Gender was not targeted as criterion for participation, and the low ratio of males to females traditionally seen in the master’s in counselling programs (more females to males) did not make it possible to get an equitable gender distribution. The gender distribution of the study’s participants emerged as five females and two males. The participants represented a wide variety of cultural, experiential, and developmental backgrounds that clearly contributed to their perspectives regarding multicultural issues—as will be seen in the analysis.

Participants had varying degrees of experience as counsellors, ranging from 60 practicum hours to 11 years of work as a professional counsellor. Theoretical orientation was dominated by a preference for integrative approaches, with person-centered therapy present in six of the seven participant profiles. Participants’ educational history showed the least variability in the descriptive analysis: six had undergraduate degrees in psychology, sociology, or social work, and one had a master’s degree in sociology.

As a group, the participants were articulate and seemed highly motivated to write and talk about their experiences as developing counsellors. There was clearly a “passion” in the way they responded to the research questions and a real commitment to their professional path. This passion is captured somewhat in the transcripts, however, it was most noticeable in the interviews, where it was possible to observe vocal inflections and body language.

To ensure anonymity, I assigned participants’ pseudonyms delineated by a single letter, and deleted any identifying characteristics, such as names of associates, geographical locations, names of universities attended, and so forth, from any quotations or descriptions used in the analysis. Participants were given a chance to read the complete thematic analysis and discussion of the research findings to confirm that their anonymity was secured to their satisfaction.
The results of the study will be discussed strictly in terms of themes, using quotes and direct statements made by participants to substantiate my findings. The collective voices of their experiences provided the basis of each unit of thematic analysis.

_Emergence of Themes and Personal Theories_

As the data analysis process evolved, it became clear that several of the emerging themes related directly to components included in participants' personal theories assignments. In their responses, participants frequently used the language of personal theory to describe how earlier life experiences impacted this area of professional development. Prior to discussing the emerging themes, I will revisit the definition of a personal theory of counselling and follow this with a description of the actual assignment that each participant had to complete.

_A personal theory of counselling_ as described by Brammer (1969) provides a rationale for what one does, and why one is doing it, in the name of helping (counselling). The theory should contain basic assumptions about how people learn and change, how personality develops, and how motivation is generated and should contain a philosophical dimension that includes one's values and expected outcomes (Brammer & MacDonald 1996). As part of their theories course, participants were required to include the following elements in their personal theories: (a) assumptions about human nature, (b) motivation, (c) characteristics of a fully functioning person, (d) how problems develop (e) goals of counselling, (f) style and techniques of treatment and (g) conditions for therapeutic change.

Participants' responses to the research question revealed that earlier life experiences most prevalently impacted theoretical views in the domain of assumptions about human nature, conditions for therapeutic change, and style and techniques of treatment. In light of the results, five primary themes emerged as most revelatory of the phenomenon under consideration (Giorgi, 1985): (1) _Becoming a counsellor: the roots of empathy_, (2) _Values development_, (3) _Culture and diversity_, (4) _Understanding Therapeutic Change_, and (5) _Style and Techniques of Treatment_. These five themes revealed that participants' earlier life experiences influenced the development of their
personal theories on two levels—philosophically and in practice—more specifically, these themes revealed ways of thinking about people and ways of thinking about practice. The following section, which is divided into the two subsections—Ways of Thinking about People, and Ways of Thinking about Practice, looks at these sources of influence.

Ways of Thinking about People

Three major themes emerged in this first portion of analysis: (1) Becoming a counsellor: the roots of empathy, (2) Values development, (3) Culture and diversity. This first theme, Becoming a counsellor: the roots of empathy, examines influences that affected participants’ beliefs about themselves, and their abilities as counsellors, particularly with regard to developing core counselling skills, such as showing compassion, being a good listener, and being non-judgmental. The second theme, values development—examines ways that earlier influences impacted participants’ overall assumptions about human nature, and the third theme, culture and diversity, focuses on values development with regard to multicultural issues. Themes five and six will be presented in the next section of this chapter under the heading Ways of Thinking about Practice.

Theme 1- Becoming a counsellor: the roots of empathy

Empathy is the ability to enter into the client’s world as if it were his or her own (Cormier & Hackney, 1993), and empathy is one of the core processes at work in the counselling relationship (Rogers, 1995). Cormier and Hackney suggested that all human beings are born with the capacity to be empathic and “early life experiences either bring out that capacity or leave it dormant” (p. 45).

Related to empathy, but not identical, is the quality of being compassionate. Corey and Corey (1992) asserted that the empathic counsellor also needs to possess characteristics of caring and openness. The ability to be caring and compassionate shows unconditional acceptance of the client’s plight and enables the client to explore their issues in the safe confines of the “counselling relationship.” The counselling relationship is considered essential to therapeutic change, as clients are validated for who they really
are and “experience their feelings fully and safely in all their degrees of intensity” (Rogers, 1995, p. 23).

In examining how earlier life experiences influenced participants’ development of basic counselling skills, it can be observed that early relational influences played a major role in cultivating attributes central to the counselling process. Normative and difficult interpersonal relationships with family members, peers, teachers, mentors, and therapists, inspired participants’ capacity to become empathic, compassionate, and good listeners. All 7 participants identified in some form or another, ways in which these earlier life experiences contributed to the development of these core counselling skills.

Three participants’ responses indicated that role modeling was a powerful influence on the development of their caring and compassionate behaviours. Individuals who influenced this development included parents and peers:

A: My father worked as a social worker. That he chose a profession that reflected his values of caring and compassion deeply influenced me, in the ways that I view those who are less fortunate in terms of poverty, abuse, and addictions.

D: When I was married, I attended Al-Anon meetings; the individuals present at those meetings taught me/modelled for me how to be non-judgmental and caring at the same time.

Therapists also emerged as factors contributing to participants’ ability to relate to clients empathically and validate clients’ feelings. This participant recognized that earlier experiences as a client fostered this capacity:

B: In that counselling . . . I experienced validation of my experiences and of my feelings, though I didn't know those concepts then . . . . The learning that I and my feelings matter, and the validation I received in the sessions, were very Rogerian, so I learned that the basic thing every counsellor needs is to be accepting, validating and empathic.

Messages from others about their caring abilities contributed to three participants’ beliefs that they possessed the skills to be a good helper. Early messages offered by teachers, parents and peers made an impact on this participant’s future directions and decisions to become a counsellor:
C: I have been told from my mid-teens that I have a talent for helpful listening that hopefully is growing. I am aware that my ability to empathize is more conscious now as both a skill and a choice.

These next two participants described occasions in which having opportunities to work with others in their early years contributed to beliefs that they could be helpful and make a difference:

D: I was also one of those children throughout elementary and middle school that tutored my classmates; this also helped me to value difference and diversity and begin to develop respect for others and their perception of their surroundings and environment, and how that influenced the choices they made.

E: Early in my elementary school years, I was often in a position of leadership and confidence on the part of teachers and students. I felt trusted and valued, and this reinforced my belief that I could make a difference. The same situation occurred frequently in my young adult numerous work experiences. Through those exposures to a variety of environments, I learned that I could easily transfer my skills and relate easily to people.

Three participants indicated that they learned to become empathic through difficult life experiences. In this first example, the participant described how growing up in an alcoholic family and acting as the family peacekeeper illuminated the importance of listening:

D: I was raised in an alcoholic home, and some of the things that went along with that, in my instance, were that I was the peacekeeper... I was the one who listened to everybody... and growing up, that kind of, that was your role naturally and you can see the benefit of that (listening).

Participant D made even more explicit connections between her experiences as a listener and subsequent attraction to person-centered therapy as part of their personal theory:

D: When I was writing my theories paper, cause I kind of like person centered, I really liked it, but I thought it wasn't enough, so when I researched and found out more and more about person centered, and person centered to me is really being present and listening... I was really drawn to that.
Difficult life experiences were also cited as giving participants insights into how Others felt when dealing with particular issues that resonated with their own. When reflecting upon the impact of his mother's death, this participant recognized the importance of the role of empathic identification in the counselling process:

F: ... that was a big loss for me, and I think going through that has influenced how I view loss, how I see other people going through the process of loss. Basically drawing upon my own experience to help them understand themselves and also for me to help understand what they are going through. Loss is highly personal, people all grieve and view things differently, but there are some common features. I can draw from my own experiences to help other people.

Although this next participant did not as directly connect his difficult life experiences with the ability to enter into the world of his clients, he did allude to how these experiences may have created an understanding and compassionate view of others:

G: If I go back to my own family of origin, the family I grew up in, it wasn't the greatest. And then to get through that myself, what I had to do was to look at what are the good points of growing up in that family and the good things about my parents and the things that I went through and then I realize, yeah, there is good in everyone...

This participant's response clearly illustrates how empathy development intersects with values acquisition. The next section of analysis extends the examination to incorporate the influence of life experiences on development of values paradigms.

Theme 2 - Values development

Corey and Callanan (1998) reminded us that the question of values permeates the therapeutic process and that counsellors need to become aware of how their personal values influence their professional work. "In making ethical decisions, ask yourself these questions: Which values should I rely on? Which values do I hold? What values affect my work with clients? Why do I hold certain values?" (p. 89). This statement emphasizes that counsellors' ways of thinking about people and their circumstances is an important factor in contributing to their ability to be empathic both in the counselling relationship and in their ethical practice.
Considering that values and life experiences are deeply connected, it is not surprising to observe that when posing the question, Do earlier life experiences influence graduate students' personal theories of counselling? a great deal was revealed regarding the origins of participants’ values. All seven participants in this study made direct and indirect connections between values developed as a result of earlier life experiences, and the values present in their personal theories of counselling. Participants acknowledged that family of origin experiences most directly influenced values acquisition, and personal experiences with suffering.

Both normative and difficult families of origin experiences were deemed to be influential in participants’ values development and ways of seeing people. Participant A reflected upon the significance of her family’s positive influence on the development of her values and beliefs:

A: I attributed my belief that there is not much that separates me from anyone who suffers the misfortunes of poverty and abuse to the values and beliefs that my father holds.

And participant F described how his parents’ expectations influenced his values regarding therapeutic processes:

F: The emphasis that was placed on me on being responsible and being accountable and being basically in control of my life as much as possible, its influenced how I perceive change.

The other five participants acknowledged ways in which values acquisition and development was influenced by difficult earlier life experiences. They described how instability in their families of origin and early environments impacted their lives and formation of their eventual assumptions about human nature. Participant C exemplified this by identifying how experiences of external instability led to a valuing of her own inner strength and the inner strengths of others:

C: The world inside my family was loving and stable . . . the world outside my family was unstable, I became very reflective and withdrawn . . . I went from believing that the answer was outside to finding the answer from within.

Participant C also revealed that this awareness and valuing of inner strength as discovered in her earlier years, contributed to beliefs in clients ability to heal from within:
C: My appreciation for internalized states found its roots in my childhood. . . I know that everyone I work with has this core of energy.

As this next participant reflected upon growing up in a difficult family situation, he also saw clear relationships on how these earlier life experiences affected his values and assumptions about human nature. He came to the understanding that there is good in everyone:

G . . . and I realize that my parents, even though they may not be the best way of bringing or raising a family, I’m sure they did the best they could for what they knew. So I think everyone has something good in them.

Participant E also recognized how values were developed through experiencing a difficult family life as a child, and was able to specifically identify experiences with poverty as being a major influence:

E: Being born in a rather large family in a community with a tradition of solidarity (homogeneous society) in the face of poverty was most determinant of my self-concept as a relational being.

Participant E also makes mention of the influence of growing up in an environment in which opportunities for higher education were not readily available to all:

E: Education was very rare. Not everybody could go to higher education and people had a strong sense of solidarity, families were struggling/ My sense of self was very original, and that was major. So awareness of struggles, and struggles to get an education influenced my personal theory of counselling.

Other individuals, aside from family of origin members, role modeled attributes of being caring and non judgmental which contributed to values development. This next participant described how the experience of participating in an Alcoholics Anonymous group fostered the development of valuing of individuals regardless of circumstance:

D: This experience further solidified my valuing of all individuals regardless of circumstance.

Participants also identified how experiences with suffering related to how their personal theories reflected these experiences. Although not stated directly, this next
participant’s statement implied that values acquired as a result of these experiences influenced how she worked with clients:

**B:** I think a lot of my own theory comes from the social inequalities I dealt with to get to where I am and how they oppressed me . . .

This participant’s statement demonstrated a clear relationship between values acquisition and personal suffering, and development of personal theory. Evidence of this type of connection was even more prevalent as participants reflected upon experiences that influenced their views on culture and diversity. The next section, which concludes this first portion of analysis, examines these connections in more detail.

**Theme 3 - Culture and diversity**

According to the Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), examining one’s life experiences as related to the development of counselling values is considered a component of good counselling practice. The council recommended that counsellors should be able to “identify key events in their lives that contributed to the development of their belief systems, . . . and engage in self exploration of their religious, spiritual, and transpersonal beliefs that support or hinder respect and valuing of different belief systems and cultures” (as cited in Corey & Callanan, 1998, p. 90).

Viewing all counselling as multicultural counselling is also considered to be an ethical responsibility, as cited in Corey’s and Callanan’s (1998) *Issues and Ethics in the Helping Professions:* “One of the major challenges facing counseling professionals is understanding the complex role that cultural diversity plays in their work. In a sense, all counseling interventions are multicultural” (p. 318). Is it important to observe that participants’ responses suggested that they defined culture broadly to encompass not only “race, ethnicity, and nationality but also to be inclusive of gender, age and social class, sexual orientation and disability, and so forth” (Corey & Callanan, 1998, p. 320).

Six out of the seven participants identified key influences in their lives that contributed to the development of their belief systems, values, and perceptions on cultural and diversity. An interesting observation was that participants spoke of their theoretical beliefs concurrently with their beliefs about culture and diversity. This was
more prevalent in the questionnaires than in the interviews. This relationship could be attributed to the fact that the graduate program that participants were enrolled in has a strong multicultural element. Early religious/spiritual experiences, relationships with significant others and peers, parental role modeling and teaching, post secondary education, and personal suffering were cited as influential in this aspect of participants' personal theory development.

Participant C identified how religious and spiritual figures introduced to her in childhood and adolescence, impacted her personal theory development:

C: I was from childhood on influenced by religious figures within Christianity. As well, hearing about Bodhisattva at age 13 was profoundly inspiring. Because I was profoundly influenced by my introduction to meditation... my theory of counselling is also influenced by these persons... In my counselling, I value compassion combined with timing of technique as taught by the transtheoretical model of change. Being influenced by spiritual masters and myself having a sense of unity of all that is, I view joining with compassion as superior to confrontation and dry rationalism.

With regards to interpersonal relationships, it was surprising to observe that significant others were not cited as playing a major role in participants' theory building, with the exception of participant A. This participant reported that her cultural perceptions were influenced by an intimate relationship with a member of a cultural minority:

A: I was involved with a Palestinian man for almost a year. My experiences with him taught me that there are deep cultural and historically significant differences between people that can never be fully understood.

When describing the challenges of being involved with this individual, this participant reflected upon learning about the importance of unconditional acceptance and validation as therapeutic tools:

A: I learned to respect, if grudgingly, that I could not possibly understand the depth of another human being's experience in the world—the best I could do would be to create an atmosphere in which that person's experience could be told and, if not, that I could implicitly accept and validate their experiences as meaningful and true.
These identifications also contributed to this participants’ desire to become a counsellor:

A: This was a frustrating piece of learning—that there are things I cannot know—that has come with my choice of counselling as a career.

Another participant reflected on the impact of working with and befriending those in minority groups on these individuals’ views on empowerment and barriers to acceptance:

B: For several years I have done paid work with disabled university students and learned what real empowerment and real independence is. I began to see the invisible barriers that disabled minority groups face.

This same participant also related how these types of connections would prompt her into examining her own worldviews:

B: When I was close friends with a woman who was deeply struggling with gender-role and sexuality issues, I came to once again examine my own beliefs and to test and revise them.

Participant D recognized how valuing of differences and diversity stemmed from earlier experiences with tutoring classmates in elementary school:

D: I was also one of those children throughout elementary and middle school that tutored my classmates; this also helped me to value difference and diversity and begin to develop respect for others and their perception of their surroundings and environment, and how that influenced the choices they made.

Post secondary educational influences were also seen as instrumental in facilitating the development of values and worldviews, and these next 2 participants identified the relationships between experiences in their undergraduate program and their counselling paradigms. Once again, it is interesting to note that empowerment, and the need to be non-judgmental were brought up in the context of working with minorities:

B: The school of social work’s philosophy of teaching and modeling empowerment to all minority groups, women, the disabled, racial and cultural minorities, greatly influenced my development of my own counselling theory.

G: I think that my biggest influence was going through the social work program, and they didn't focus on counselling. It was more on child protection and policy,
and it was a feminist, first nations perspective so that’s what I really learned from that program . . . I think also the part around being non-judgmental was a big part of learning through the social work program.

Throughout the analysis, it was also observed that participants’ personal experiences with suffering and hardship produced the ability to see the plight of others in a more empathic way. This was particularly relevant to values development in the formation of an inclusive worldview, in which participants learned global tolerance and acceptance of minorities and differences.

Several examples of this connection were noted in one form or another throughout different sections of this analysis. These three participants’ statements really captured the essence of the connection between personal experience with hardship and theoretical paradigms:

E: Being born in a rather large family . . . in the face of poverty . . . I developed a strong desire to contribute to the welfare of society. I was also exposed to the economic and political reality through family involvement in third-world issues.

The desire to use experiences to “help” others emerged as a recurring theme throughout the analysis, particularly when related to helping those who were culturally diverse or oppressed. These next two participants cite family of origin experiences as having a positive influence on this aspect of their personal theories:

B: When I was a child, my parents helped me to notice oppression in Canadian society that is invisible to the mainstream or dominant-majority people . . . this led to my love of learning about other cultures in my adulthood and a desire to work in a respectful and anti-oppressive way to empower minority groups in counselling.

A: There are those who draw the distinction between “them” and “us”—the kind of thinking that dictates a view that “I would never become like that.” This is not the view I was raised with. Rather, my perspective is this: “In an instant I could be any one of the people who find themselves on the streets, in shelters, addicts, perpetrators and victims both.” This ability to see myself in these places is what contributes to the place of empathy and compassion in my personal theory of counselling.
In addition to positive family of origin experiences, participants also observed how they had developed their beliefs around differences through experiences with their own suffering. Participant C revealed how experiencing her own early struggles with addiction influenced her ability to relate to others who have similar experiences. In this example the participant also makes a direct connection between this empathic understanding and her belief in the effectiveness of Rogerian (Person Centered) approaches:

C: . . . these experiences have assisted me to interact with substance-addicted clients in a genuinely person-centered way.

In concluding this section, it can be observed that the analysis of participants’ responses revealed that experiences contributing to the development of values and beliefs were of importance to their counselling practice and theory development, particularly with regard to developing values and cultural sensitivity. Participants recognized that early relational influences and experiences with suffering contributed to the development of their own empathy. In addition, parent, peer and therapist role modelling, and imparting of values of caring and compassion, increased participants’ tolerance for other cultures and minority groups.

Participants in this study clearly identified relationships between these influences and how they related to more specific aspects of their therapeutic practice. Insights as to how these influences impacted therapeutic strategies will be discussed in the following section, Ways of Thinking about Practice, which will introduce themes 4 and 5.

Ways of Thinking about Practice

In this section of the analysis, participants’ ways of thinking about practice are considered under the final two themes, 4) Understanding Therapeutic Change, and 5) Style and Techniques of Treatment. The examination will focus primarily on the ways participants’ life experiences related to their approaches and beliefs regarding practice. The results in this section produced more specific connections between earlier life experiences and personal theory.
Theme 4 - Understanding therapeutic change

Understanding therapeutic change is considered a cornerstone of good counselling practice. Cormier and Hackney (1993) asserted, “The whole object of counselling is to initiate and facilitate desirable change” (p. 4), and a comprehensive understanding of the processes involved in therapeutic change and how it occurs is “the real issue in talking about interventions” (p. 28).

Personal theories of counselling serve as a set of guidelines to explain the change process, in other words, “how human beings learn, change, and develop” (Cormier & Hackney, 1993, p. 4). Because of this emphasis on the change process in therapy, it was not surprising to see this process frequently referenced in one form or another by participants in this study.

Participants asserted that understanding the change process began with identifying their own earlier personal experiences with change, as well as the beliefs about change that others imparted to them. All of the participants found relationships between their earlier life experiences and their capacity to understand and believe in the change process. Early experiences with family of origin, interpersonal relationships, and counsellors/therapists were cited as influential in this aspect of participants personal theory development.

With regards to family of origin influences, both fathers and mothers played significant role in the development of theoretical understandings. As observed in these two responses, fathers were particularly influential:

A: I think one non-counselling experience that has influenced my personal theory has been through discussions with my father about the belief in the capacity of persons to heal change.

D: Being raised in an alcoholic family in which I provided the sounding board for my father allowed me to learn the value of listening.

Participant D further recognized that her professional practice evolved from her childhood experiences, and relationship with her father. This contributed to a belief in the valuing of listening as a therapeutic change agent:
D: . . . so in my counselling practice, I make sure to, at the very least, even if I don’t know what else to do, I listen . . . listening and asking relevant questions, that can help people to shift just enough so you get a different perspective of what’s going on for them so they can start to see that they have options or some avenue of change . . .

This next participant identified how family of origin clarified both the importance of caring and the change process. In this case, maternal and female influences were cited as significant to this development:

E: Some of my aunts and my own mother were very strongly minded women who also had a very kind disposition towards myself and others in general. Through them, I learned that change is always possible and that people are to be respected. They showed infinite patience.

The experience of being in a relationship with family members fortified this participants’ beliefs about the power of interpersonal systems and therapeutic relationships to heal and change:

F: Being in a family and realizing that you’re all connected to each other by relationships and how that influences my personal theory of counselling—people in isolation within a system, within family, within relationships . . .

Participant F further explicates how experiences of interconnectedness influenced his perceptions on the change process:

F: . . . that change is always possible and that everyone has the potential for change and that change is the responsibility of the individual so that the disempowered part of the self is empowered to change. Change doesn’t come from the outside it comes from within.

In addition to family of origin experiences, other interpersonal relationships and earlier work experiences were cited by two participants as influential in their theoretical development and beliefs about the change process:

C: After several years, I found the work boring. I knew I was off course. I learned that just because a person is good at something, they do not need to make it their career or even develop that skill. I believe that it is more important for counselling to help people connect with their deeply longing values and meanings, dimensions
that often lie unexpressed in the inner being, in order to assist people to change in developmentally healthy ways.

A: How I work with kids is connected to my experience as a TA in a kindergarten class. . . it’s about socialization, and it’s about isolation, and it’s about relationship, so in terms of my theory, probably more is related to my experiences working in a kindergarten class . . . so from an observer stand point it just reaffirmed my belief in relationship, as healing . . . the use of the self the use of relationship, what’s happening between two people in the moment, that has the capacity to be transformative.

Participant C also observed that change occurs from connectedness with Self and others:

C: These experiences (counselling) have convinced me of the great value counselling adds to lives. My personal theory of counselling considers clients’ goals in terms of how to be skilfully in connection with other people and how to be skilfully in connection with the Self.

In addition to being a major influencer in understanding the value of relationship in therapeutic change, personal counselling experiences were also cited by six of the seven participants as providing major insights into therapeutic processes in general. For these two participants, personal work provided major insights into the change process and their subsequent theories of practice:

G: I use behavioural approaches in my daily routines for myself. For example, in order to take responsibility for my weight, I record what my food intake should be or what I want it to be, and I compare it with what I actually eat; thus understanding where I need to make changes or control what takes place.

B: The validation from them (counsellors) influenced my own change . . . and it influenced my theory in that I totally see the major importance of validating and having unconditional positive regard and those Rogerian things.

As seen in previous examples, Rogerian (Rogers, 1969) influences continued to have a significant impact on participants’ practice. These two participants recognized that simple core processes (e.g., listening, validating, being empathic, etc.) were at work in
the change process and believed that person-centered approaches were the foundation of their work, regardless of other methods ascribed to:

A: . . . and also have a belief that person centered really uses every counselling technique that I see out there today, and if you work with people, that’s a given, and you may do things on top of that, but I have a feeling that it’s been incorporated into everyone’s modality. And I guess I say that because in my experience, I don’t say, I can’t say I work from a person-centered perspective because I feel it’s not distinct anymore, it’s blended in, infused with everything else.

B: I think what I’m trying to say is without the counsellors, I still would have gotten here, but the validation has been helpful. It’s step one, it’s always the first thing you have to do, so instead of being a huge amount of what I do, it’s smaller, but until it happens the rest can’t happen.

It was interesting to observe how this participant (above) switched back and forth between past experiences as a client and present beliefs as a counsellor. This observation highlighted obvious relationships between past experience and current practice. This next statement really captured the essence of this phenomenon:

B: I think that my own work always really influences my personal theory, I kind of dip back and forth, look at myself, look at theory, look at myself, look at theory, and out of that evolved a way to work with people and more understanding of people.

While the above statement reflected upon how experience as a client influenced theory in general, the following series of statements were more specific regarding the personal experiencing of therapeutic change and participants’ subsequent theoretical orientations:

E: . . . A third experience is with a practitioner trained in bioenergetics. This work allows me direct experience of body-centered therapy, which is a royal road for the unconscious contribution in change.

F: Understanding the links between my thoughts, emotions and behaviours was crucial in overcoming many obstacles. In dealing with losses that I have needed support with, narrative approaches have worked well with me.
Along with recognizing how earlier experiences as a client influenced participants' positive perceptions on therapeutic processes, insights were also shared on what didn't work. This participant's statement will conclude this section on therapeutic change:

C: The hypnotherapist was impersonal and sent me away with a recommendation to see a psychiatrist. Not only was that a poor recommendation, she failed to do even minimal counselling by validating feelings. . . . I have never forgotten that session as an example of what not to do.

A comprehensive understanding of the processes involved in therapeutic change was highly valued by participants, and they recognized that a dialogue about theory development and interventions needed to include an understanding of change and how it occurred. Several participants identified their own earlier therapeutic experiences with change as being significant to this understanding, as well as the beliefs others, parents, and significant relationships imparted to them. Relationships clearly emerged between these earlier life experiences and the participants' capacity to understand and believe in therapeutic paradigms that they would subsequently adopted as their own. This phenomenon is the focus of the next section.

**Theme 5 - Style and techniques of treatment**

Related to the process of constructing a personal theory from a philosophical standpoint, is one's actual selection of methodological working paradigms. Counsellors and psychologists historically have been encouraged to adopt a theoretical orientation very early in their training (Finch, Mattson, & Moore, 1992; Murdock, 1991; Prochaska & Norcross, 1983), and participants in this study were anxious to discuss the methodologies that were embraced in their personal theory. It became clear that choice of theoretical orientation was an important factor in conceptualizing the roots of personal theory building.

Results imparted in this section further narrowed the focus of the research question toward explicating connections between life experience and theory. Participants' responses at this juncture most indicated a tendency to use the language of personal theory concurrently with describing life experiences.
Families of origin were influential to the development of participants' personal theory from the standpoint of understanding the roots of their theoretical frames of reference. These four participants identified connections between their early family experiences and how they thought about practice.

F: My family being fairly positive and very humanistic and very encouraging, was probably the basic influence of developing my personality, which led to my development of how I thought about people, which led to the development of how I think about my personal theory of counselling.

G: My family of origin has led me to follow family systems theory and to understand it more clearly with the use of my own examples.

D: My brother influenced my theory of counselling through his own involvement in community work, both at an organizational level and at an analysis (structure of society) level. Through him, I learned to look at interrelationships between events.

C: My dominant focus in counselling, whether stated explicitly to clients or not, is on the client's state of consciousness and psychodynamic condition. My appreciation of internalized realities found its roots in my childhood.

Participants C and F also identified a direct relationship between parenting style, and subsequent interest in certain counselling styles. Both participants cited these two styles discussed here in their list of theoretical preferences:

C: My dad’s the cognitive behavioural-solution focused one, and my mom’s the person centered, meaning of life, family oriented one. . .

F: That part of me that uses Solution Focused approaches, that uses Cognitive approaches when your challenging negative assumptions, and basically where you’re arriving at beliefs, I think that speaks to that part (the way I was parented) as influences.

In addition to family of origin influences, personality development and development of interests were also cited as influential in personal theory development. An assumption is made here that personality development is typically rooted in earlier life experiences, and personality and counsellor development are closely linked (see Corey and Callanan, 1998). Four participants made mention of these influences and their
responses illustrated the diversity that existed when personality style was linked to personal theory. Participant A portrayed a gregarious outspoken personality style:

A: Culturally my beliefs and values are rooted in Jewish tradition – one of which is a value of debating and argumentation as an instrument of learning. This coupled with my gender - has probably influenced my personality in ways that are reflected in my counselling. I am gregarious and outspoken . . . and these values certainly play out in how I execute my theories of counselling (i.e. as opposed to valuing discretion, diplomacy, and indirectness). I see these traits as limiting my efficacy as a counsellor in some cross-cultural settings.

Whereas participants D and C revealed their tendencies towards more introspective approaches:

D: I believe that my personal theory of counselling reflects my personality style. I am a private, quiet person: this is reflected in my counselling style in the tone of my voice and my tendency to let the client fill the space (I don’t do a great deal of talking in my counselling sessions).

C: My personality style is becoming more consistent with my sometimes Buddhist and sometimes Vedic view of life. The process of personality formation is consistent with my view of a counselling personality.

Participant E identified that her personal theory possessed a combination of personality traits and interests:

E: My personal theory of counselling reflects a composite of my personality traits and interests. I am flexible and analytical. I also have been fascinated by dance and movement all my life and plan to develop a practice in movement therapy.

Although not as directly articulated as the previous responses, long term interests, and learning style were also seen as influential. (It is assumed here that a love of learning is also rooted in earlier life experiences):

B: I love learning and I am fairly comfortable staying “cognitive” rather than expressive. I rely more heavily on Cognitive Behavioural and Constructivist and the Cognitive aspects of Feminist and Anti Oppressive work than I do on expressive therapies and somatic experiencing, etc.
Participants also made mention of the importance of doing personal work to the understanding of the actual selection and application of methodology. In addition to statements made about the general influence of therapists on the development of personal theories, four of the seven participants cited specific examples that demonstrated that a variety of specific methodologies evolved from these experiences:

E: The three long-term experiences I had as a client mirrored my path in developing a personal theory of counselling.

G: My earlier experiences as a client was from a narrative perspective allowing me to tell my story(ies). At the time I had no idea that it was a narrative process. This can also be seen as a constructivist approach. This was done through dialogue (telling many stories) as well as authoring single stories.

B: My own experience coping with a chronic illness . . . Whereas dealing with work and education have shown that cognitive behavioural methods are very valuable, and that self management, especially when done in groups, can be a powerful technique.

F: When I have needed support in the past, a cognitive-behavioural approach has been very helpful.

One participant explicitly described how two therapists directly influenced her working paradigms and frame of reference for conceptualizing clients:

A: She was also a feminist and family systems therapist with a lot of experience working with families. She brought in a discussion of family roles and identity development, which has influenced my understanding of the place of family in individual counselling. . . . I think the most relevant thing that I have learned from her has been HOW to practice feminist counselling, for example, she changes chairs with the client every other session.

A: His way of working interested me in spirituality in counselling, as I found his own spiritual beliefs enriched the counselling process without being intrusive or unwelcome. Also he introduced me to the idea of Gestalt psychology.

In addition to personal therapists, university and college professors appeared to have a major influence on personal theory development. This influence was cited on several levels—philosophically:
G: I think it was the actual professor who was presenting the course who thought it (being non judgmental) should be part of the course. Yeah, so I remember that was such a small part of a huge core course, but that’s what really intrigued me.

and in actual practice and selection of theoretical models:

A: . . . One of my profs. worked with trauma in the body (somatic experiencing). I think this had a connection with my ability to “believe” in the capacity and wisdom of the human organism to heal.

In the following example, participant B discussed the influence of course material on the development of her personal theory of counselling:

B: The reading I did at that time led me to incorporate some of the most empowering aspects of solution-oriented theory and resistance therapy into my own counselling theory.

However, it was not simply exposure to these materials and methodologies, that had an impact on personal theory, it was also the embodiment of them through direct practice and role modeling. This participant cited two examples in which two different professors had an impact theoretically:

A: The prof. who practiced Hakomi embodied her beliefs. She demonstrated the value of living what one believes. She contributed to my understanding of the importance of living in congruence with one’s beliefs—that the stronger the connection between one’s values (that are made explicit) and the practice of counselling, the more integrity one brings to the counselling endeavour.

And in actual practice;

A: She (the professor) took me through an internal family systems exercise in working with “parts” with clients. This had a huge impact on me and I often bring in this language of “parts” with clients.

These next two participants cite similar influences and their observations extended to highlighting the importance of opportunities for practice, and ongoing reflectivity. The importance of the need for theoretical and identity congruency in personal theory development is illustrated in these examples in which participants discuss the impact of graduate coursework:
B: Right now in the family course . . . they're getting us to look at our family of origin, and stances, and ways of communicating. I take that and look what happened and how it felt, look at theory, look back at it again with fresh eyes again and look back at theory again. And now we're at the point where we have to think 'okay, how would we use that with people?'

D: The Theories course was instrumental in me being able to clarify my personal theory of counselling. The (theories) paper forced me to prioritize various theories, and consequently include some and exclude others. Through researching and writing the paper I learned a great deal more about person-centered counselling, and discovered how well it fit with my existential learnings, which fit in well with my wish to learn more about Narrative therapy. I don't believe I would have been able to articulate, to myself or others, my theory without this exercise, at least not at this particular moment in my life.

Summary of Thematic Analysis

Participants, who were all master’s in counselling students or recent graduates, ranged in age from 29 to 53. They came from a wide variety of cultural, experiential, and developmental backgrounds and had varying degrees of experience as counsellors, ranging from 60 practicum hours to 11 years of work as professional counsellors. Although there was a range of other methodologies included in their profiles, person-centered approaches dominated theoretical orientation.

Despite the diversity in backgrounds and experiences, there was not the expected diversity in the results or ways participants spoke of experiences. In fact, there appeared to be a “common academic language” embraced in the dialogues. This symmetry could be attributed to the influence of their mutual academic experiences, as well as the focus of the research question.

The common language used by participants to describe the influence of their earlier life experiences centered primarily around counselling theory and related concepts. Elements of personal theory were referenced in one form or another by all seven participants; however, views on conditions for therapeutic change and style and techniques of treatment were most prevalently cited. Participants’ views about human
nature were also illuminated by this study, particularly with regard to minority issues. These perspectives were embedded in the domain of values, beliefs, and culture.

In reviewing the results of the thematic analysis it can be observed that relationships clearly emerged between earlier life experiences and participants' selection and practice of styles of treatment. It was revealed that personal counselling and therapists had the most influence on theory building, followed closely by professors.

Personal counselling was cited as influential in 6 of the 7 participants and was both a recent and historic relational influence with regard to participants' selection of theoretical orientation. A connection also emerged between participants' choice of methodology as practicing counsellors and theoretical orientations of their personal theories. This connection was revealed by comparing participants' selection of methodologies with the methodologies utilized by their personal therapists.

When personal counselling took place earlier in the participant's life, the connections between one's eventual working paradigm were not explicit; however, as participants reflected on their experiences as clients, they made clearer associations between their own experiences and their eventual practice. There were also associations made between their experiences and how not to practice. One participant also cited the relationship between their theoretical paradigm and an earlier work experience.

A solid, but perhaps more predictable relationship emerged between one's theoretical orientation and the influence of university professors. It was evident that university professors played an important role in introducing participants to theories they would eventually adopt as their own. As with experiences with personal therapists, in all cases referenced here, each participant included the referenced methodology in their list of selection of methodology.

Another solid relationship between personality style, interests, and personal theory was evident as five of the seven participants identified how these influences impacted how they viewed counselling. As personality is formed by life experience (Corey and Callanan, 1998), it seemed logical that this aspect of counsellor development could be linked to theory development.
The role of life experiences as related to practice also received support from Corey and Callanan (1998) who asserted that the counsellor’s personality is an “instrument in therapeutic practice” (p. 64);

One basic component in the practice of therapy and counseling is the counselor’s own personality as an instrument in therapeutic practice. Counselors may possess knowledge and technical skills and still be ineffective in significantly reaching clients. The life experiences, attitudes, and caring that counselors bring to their sessions are crucial factors in establishing an effective therapeutic relationship (p. 64).

The next section of this chapter will present a discussion of the research findings. Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s study (1992) *Themes in Counsellor Development* will be used to compare and contrast the results of this study.

**Discussion of Findings in the Context of Skovholt and Ronnestad’s Themes in Counsellor Development**

Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s study (1992) *Themes in Counsellor Development*, has much relevance to studying developmental processes of counsellor education (Fong, 1998; Granello & Hazler 1998; Spruill & Benshoff, 2000) and was a valuable tool in this exploration. In her review of counselling pedagogy, Fong (1998) pointed out that counsellor education could benefit from paying more attention to Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) findings in designing effective training programs.

This section of chapter 4 presents the findings of this study as conceptualized in Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) study. As discussed in chapter 2, Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s study addressed counsellor development across the career lifespan, and there were themes presented in their discussion that were not relevant to a study on beginning counsellors’ experiences. For this reason, those themes were omitted from this analysis.

The discussion, which is divided into two parts, 1) Have Your Earlier Life Experiences Influenced in Any Way the Development of Your Personal Theory of Counselling? and 2) Were There any Persons or Groups of Persons Who Influenced the Development of Your Personal Theory of Counselling? presents an analysis of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) themes (1, 3, 4, 5, 11, 12, 14, 17, and 20) as related to
the results of this study. In this analysis, some of the themes will be combined under one heading, as there was considerable redundancy in examining them separately. Beside each heading, relevant and related themes are denoted in brackets.

1) *Have Your Earlier Life Experiences Influenced in Any Way the Development of Your Personal Theory of Counselling?*

The first primary research question was intended to examine specific events that occurred in the participants’ lives that influenced their ways of thinking about people and practice as identified by Bogden’s and Biklen’s (1998) dimension three. It also was assumed that Bogden’s and Biklen’s dimension two, which examines perspectives and ways of thinking, was automatically embedded in this focus.

Overall, participants in the present study were more focused on relational influences than specific events and theoretical bodies of knowledge. This phenomenon is in part consistent with Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) findings, which revealed that relationships were more influential on counsellor development than knowledge. The relevance of life experiences as related to theory building was mitigated through relationships with others.

In this first part of analysis, the role of life experiences on the development of personal theory is contrasted with Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) themes related to (a) individuation, (b) continuous professional reflection, (c) reliance on external expertise, (d) conceptual systems, (e) personal life, and (f) experience with suffering.

*Individuation (1, 3, 5).*

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) suggested that individuation involves an increasingly higher order integration of the professional and personal self. This integration is delineated by a movement away from an ideological way of functioning to a mode of functioning that is more individuated and founded on “experienced-based generalizations” (p. 507). Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s observation that “professional development is growth towards individuation” (p. 507) was relevant to examining the potential impact of life experiences on counsellor development and theory building.
As counselling students entering master's program are typically in their thirties and beyond, it was worthwhile to cross-reference an examination of their experiences with connections to adult education, as adult education and adult development are sometimes "inextricably bound" (Tennant & Pogson, 1995, p. xii). Adult learning theorists emphasized the importance of understanding an adult's capacity for growth and transformation as part of adult learning experience (Daloz, 1986; Knowles, 1980).

As was observed in the thematic analysis, participants in this study cited clear examples in which they were able to use their student experiences as an opportunity for personal development and professional growth. University professors at both undergraduate and graduate levels were named as particularly influential in sculpting participants' life and career directions, and values acquisition. This type of professional growth is closely related to Skovholt's and Ronnestad's (1992) definition of individuation as related to counsellor development and practice.

According to Skovholt's and Ronnestad's (1992) definition, "individuation involves an increasingly higher order integration of the professional and personal self in which there is a strong consistency between ideology—one's values and theoretical stance—and methods and techniques used by the individual" (p. 507). In this study I found clear evidence of personal and professional integration as participants' described the impact of their student experiences on their philosophical development:

E: Professors in college (mostly in philosophy, literature and sociology) and university were excellent guides and inspirational figures who helped me learn how to think through issues and appreciate reality in a multi-dimensional way.

and,

B: The resistance therapy concepts that I encountered back at that time really changed my life, in regards to dealing with the residue of my own personal issues. I wanted to use resistance therapy and the other empowering ideas that I was encountering at that time to help others do the same, and grow in the same way.

That these participants spoke of experience, world view, and theory in the same context demonstrated an awareness of consistency between ideology—one's values and theoretical stance—and methods and techniques used. The ability to recognize how values intersected with practice was compatible with demonstrating an increasingly
"higher order integration of the professional and personal self" (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 503) and as noted by Skovholt and Ronnestad, this was considered to be a hallmark of individuation.

I believe in part that the design of the study provided a natural segue for participants to reflect on their own individuation processes, and thus created the strong result seen here for individuation themes. In examining the influence of earlier life experience on theory building, the assertion that individuation includes a higher-order integration of the professional and personal self gains credibility in the current study.

**Continuous professional reflection (1, 3).**

Identified in this theme is the importance of continuous professional reflection of "intense professional and personal experience" (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 509). Corey and Callanan (1998) also recommended "ongoing introspection and discussions with supervisors or colleagues are necessary to determine how to make optimal use of your values in the therapeutic relationship" (p. 107). Not surprisingly, Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s study revealed that the ability to reflect was considered the major indicator of counsellor growth across the career lifespan.

Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) observation, “as the professional matures, continuous professional reflection constitutes the central developmental process” (p. 509) was closely related to concepts of individuation, as Skovholt and Ronnestad also maintained that opportunities for “continuous professional reflection” about one’s personal and professional experiences are the most important factor in facilitating a professional identity that is differentiated and autonomous.

The design of this study naturally led to “professional reflection about one’s personal and professional experiences” (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 509), And answering the research question was found to be of value to participants, as the process enabled them to look at some of their own historical paradigms in relation to practice. One participant commented on how answering the research question enabled them to reflect upon the origins of how she did counselling:

**D:** The neat thing about this question is that I hadn't really linked it to that before.

... I always knew that my earlier life experiences had something to do with how I
do counselling, but I hadn't really thought about it . . . And so by thinking about it maybe it was right. It was very revealing, and very interesting; it's something I'm going to think about a little bit more.

It was not possible to actually measure the effectiveness of this type of reflection in neither the study nor the ways it led to an autonomous identity. The responses could be interpreted as a move toward this direction however, as participants spoke of ways their experiences—both negative and positive—influenced their current ways of seeing people. There was some indication that these paths were autonomous and differentiated from family of origin. This same participant described how reacting against paradigms in her family of origin led to autonomous beliefs that later became part of her practice:

**D:** The experiences in my family of origin contributed a great deal to the manner in which I counsel at present. This development has been a process occurring over a great span of time and has evolved mostly out of a reaction to circumstances that occurred during my developmental years. My father was the individual that I was reacting against, and in that way he was instrumental in the development of my personal theory of counselling.

*Conceptual systems (1,5).*

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) continued to expand upon the development of counsellor identity and the process of “professional individuation” (p. 510) as they observed, “with time and experience the individual gradually becomes more congruent with self as they shed elements of the professional role that are incongruent with their identity” (p. 510). As this participant reflected upon her father's influence and growth in the masters program, the emerging need for congruency and compatibility between personal and professional belief systems was evident:

**A:** I think I paid lip service to this idea (that persons have the capacity to heal and change) because it was something I knew that I was supposed to believe as a counsellor . . . and yet, I didn't have the life experiences to really trust in this tenet. My father seemed to value this, believe this, and respect others when it came to this idea — and this made me question and sit with my own inability to trust and believe in this idea that people (and more saliently, myself) have it
within themselves to heal and grow and change. It was as if ‘intellectually’ I knew this to be the case—because if it does not come from within, then how does change and growth happen?—and yet, I could not ‘feel’ this to be the case...(this has changed for me now), but at that time when I was applying to the program, this was a belief that I knew I had to hold, and yet didn’t quite know how to believe it.

This particular phenomenon was not observed as directly in other participants’ responses, possibly because time and experience were not yet factors in these graduate students’ experiences. This was an example in which the results of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) study could not be generalized to our population, as counsellors well into their careers were also included in the Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s sample.

Participants’ statements in the present study also did not support Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) observation that “compatibility with self seemed to prevail over the need to ascribe to empirically based theory, or theoretical choices in graduate school as the counselor becomes more professionally individuated” (p. 510). The participant’s responses did, however, indicate that the need for compatibility with self was in many cases at least equal to the need to ascribe to empirically based theory or theoretical choices in graduate school. This was also observed in thematic analysis of responses that illustrated congruency between personality style and personal theory. In addition to the direct teachings of professors, peer presentations and opportunity for direct practice played a role in the development of compatibility between self and theory:

D: The knowledge gained through peer presentations helped me to understand specific aspects of several theories, and to see how I may be able to apply them in my personal practice. This also allowed me to see which theories I ascribed to, and which theories presented me with tools to augment my practice (in a way that fits with my personal philosophy).

Compatible with Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) concepts of individuation, differentiation, and autonomy in counsellor development was the concept of therapeutic flexibility. Halgin (1985) asserted that skilled experienced counsellors are able to operate from conceptual systems that encompass the diverse needs of clients: “The counselor who has an open stance has a greater likelihood of success than someone who rigidly
adheres to a single theoretical system . . . skilful counselors are able to focus on correct treatment goals and to employ a wide range of therapeutic techniques appropriately to specific presenting problems” (p. 335). Significant to the findings of this study are the diverse origins of participants’ interests in certain theoretical positions and their openness to embracing a wide variety of theoretical orientations. Although not stated directly, the need for flexibility was observed, as seen in these two separate responses:

G: I can play with whatever I want. . . . I don’t have to stick with one certain thing, so I’d practice what I would take in, then generally I would work with a number of things

and,

E: A psychotherapist using an eclectic approach helped me to develop a positive regard towards others in counselling. . . . His flexibility in looking at issues influenced my views of counselling.

In light of the results of the current study, Halgin’s (1985) assertion that theoretical development needed to include some degree of flexibility in order to factor in the possible variations in clients’ backgrounds, can be extended to infer that theoretical development needs to include some degree of flexibility in order to factor in the possible variations in counsellors’ backgrounds. Participants’ responses in this study illuminated ways that life experiences, including graduate studies and relationships with others, especially one’s therapist, influenced interest in particular methodologies and approaches.

Reliance on external expertise (1, 4, 5, 11, 14, 17).

The premise of this theme, “beginning counsellors rely on external expertise; senior practitioners rely on internal expertise” (p. 510) was that with time and ongoing practice with clients, experience-based generalizations and accumulated wisdom replaced the use of established context-free theory. The individual’s own unarticulated preconceptualised ideology or “intuition” regarding therapeutic practice forms the basis of professional functioning.

Significant to personal theory building and this study was Ronnestad’s and Skovholt’s (1992) assumption that the prerequisite to operating from articulated wisdom is the acquisition of a core knowledge base of established theories: “From this theory-
research base, hundreds of hours of experience produce useful generalizations” (p. 510). Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s observation was highly relevant to understanding the developmental processes underscoring personal theory building from both educational and experiential perspectives. It illustrated how the combination of engaging in “a highly disciplined and intensive study of the core body of knowledge in the field” (p. 510) and actual experience, provided counsellors with a “parsimonious set of deeper level schemata that can be activated consistently to assist in conceptualizing individual clients” (Cummings, A., Hallburg, E., Martin, A., Slemon, A., & Hiebert, R., 1990, p. 132). This observation found support in the current study, as participants recognized how educational and practical experiences eventually synthesized into current practice methods:

G: I think solution focused was a big part of change, to see how change could happen so quickly. So as you go through . . . so I questioned a lot of it you know. That’s when I did have quite a few theories I had chosen on the questionnaire . . . so I would work with the situation. . . . I tried narrative and that worked . . . or sometimes it was a combination of more than one theory.

This participant’s theoretical approach also exemplified individuation as founded on “experienced based generalizations” (1992, p. 507). Hence, Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s observation that “professional development is growth towards individuation” (p. 507) gains further support by the current study, as it illuminated the role of educational life experiences in theory building.

*Personal life and experience with suffering (11, 12, 20).*

Participants in Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) study repeatedly talked about the impact of life experiences on their work as therapists and counsellors and said that “Personal life strongly influences professional functioning.” (p. 513). Both normative and difficult life experiences were considered to be immensely rich sources of information and motivation for their work with clients. As observed in the thematic analysis, this phenomenon related with statements made by participants in this study regarding both normative life experiences—“I was raised in a very positive family that put great value on responsibility and respect. I guess this has influenced my style as a clinician.”
(participant F)—and difficult life experiences—“Being born in a rather large family in a community with a tradition of solidarity (homogeneous society) in the face of poverty was most determinant of my self concept as a relational being.” (participant E). Difficult life experiences, particularly experience with suffering in one’s family of origin, were observed in this study to be highly influential on theory building. Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) theme 20 was particularly relevant to this portion of analysis.

Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) observation that “extensive experience with suffering produces heightened tolerance and acceptance of human variability,” (p. 514) directly aligned the role of life experience to counsellor development and practice. They indicated that “the personal life of the therapist-counsellor is instructive, and through the process of living one’s life as an adult, a variety of experiences, including personal disappointments and choices, help to make the individual less judgmental of others” (p. 514).

Participants in the present study articulated the value they derived from their own distress and how relating to these experiences contributed to their own empathic frames of reference and work as counsellors:

B: My theory was influenced by my own work to empower myself to change and to overcome past trauma and other effects of being a child of parents with alcohol and abuse issues. I married young, and experienced the same issues in my lengthy marriage. My experiences of leaving the marriage led to a passionate interest in learning how to counsel in a way that empowers women or men who are abuse survivors.

Corey and Callanan (1998) contended that life experiences of clients and counsellors need not always be parallel in order for treatment to be effective, but they did support Sue’s and Sue’s (1990) assertion that counsellors “become culturally aware so they can critically evaluate their conditioned values and assumptions” (p. 78).

As observed in the thematic analysis of the present study, three types of influences were noted: (a) those derived from participants’ own experiences with suffering, (b) those derived vicariously or from their alliances with persons who were suffering, and (c) those derived from positive experiences. Two separate participant
statements represented this range of influences. This first participant described how values were derived directly from her own experiences with hardship:

C: My own experimentation with abuse of substances gives me an insider’s perspective on the etiology of substance use and leads me to take an informed and definite perspective on the etiology of substance use . . .

Whereas this next participant described how values were derived directly from alliances with persons experiencing hardship and intolerance:

B: For several years I have done paid work with disabled university students and learned what real empowerment and real independence is. I began to see the invisible barriers that disabled minority groups face. . . . When I was close friends with a woman who was deeply struggling with gender-role and sexuality issues, I came to once again examine my own beliefs and to test and revise them.

Other participants in this study focused on describing the roots of their cultural awareness and articulated how earlier exposure to intolerance influenced their commitment to working with minorities in non-judgmental ways. In some cases, it was difficult to identify whether these experiences were direct or vicarious experiences with suffering, but an assumption could be made that vicarious experiences with suffering were also direct experiences with suffering. These two participants identified how the development of their own cultural awareness related directly to theoretical development:

B: My parents’ own experiences with being members of cultural minorities led them to teach and model respect for the values and beliefs of other cultures. . . . When I later encountered the theories of feminism and constructivism, they built on the ideas of respect for other people’s values and beliefs.

and,

D: As a young child and adolescent, I was exposed to racism and intolerance of difference and/or diversity. I believe that I reacted to this environment by beginning to develop a belief that all individuals are valuable merely by the fact that they are. This is the beginning of my humanistic/person-centered aspect in my counselling theory.
As discussed in the thematic analysis these two participants recognized ways that their non-judgmental paradigms were influenced by positive experiences, including direct modeling and teaching:

**B**: My parents helped me to notice oppression in Canadian society that is invisible to the mainstream or dominant-majority people . . . this led to my love of learning about other cultures in my adulthood, and a desire to work in a respectful and anti-oppressive way to empower minority groups in counselling.

and,

**D**: . . . the individuals present at those meetings (Alcoholics Anonymous) taught me and modeled for me how to be non-judgmental and caring at the same time. This further solidified my valuing of all individuals regardless of circumstance.

In theme 20, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) also suggested that motivation for entering the counselling profession was clearly articulated by the graduate students participating in their study, as they identified reasons for entering the counselling profession and trace these reasons back to earlier life experiences. As was revealed by the findings of this study, many connections also were made between one's earlier life experiences and later ability to see oneself as counsellor. The participants in this study made several statements related to wanting to become helpers: “My first meaningful experience as a client in 1997 had more of an impact on my choosing counselling as a profession,” “I developed a strong desire to contribute to the welfare of society,” and “I realized the strong desire I had to help people fulfill their life’s aspirations.”

Participants' responses in my study also revealed that much of the discussion on the development of empathy and the ability to be “person-centered” led them to recognize how these attributes contributed to how they saw themselves as counsellors; as this participant pointed out: “My own experiences have assisted me to interact with substance-addicted clients in a genuinely person-centered way.” (participant C).

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) observed in theme 20 that both direct experiences with client concerns and one’s own life issues help to make the counsellor less judgmental of others. This observation was substantiated in my study and was clearly extended to personal theory building. Life experiences—normative, positive, and
difficult—impacted counsellor development, theory building, and motivations for choosing the profession.

The findings of this study also expanded beyond Skovholt's and Ronnestad's (1992) original premise that values development was an adult-oriented process. Participants in the present study were able to include the impact of reflections in childhood on earlier life experiences. This suggested that values development as related to one's eventual frames was not limited to an adult-oriented process. Perhaps at the time, children are not aware that these processes will be helpful to them in their eventual profession, but I believe that there are some cases in which children are somewhat aware of where they may eventually end up as adults. Early messages offered by teachers and peers made an impact on these three participants' future directions and decisions to become counsellors:

C: I have been told from my mid-teens that I have a talent for helpful listening that hopefully is growing

and,

D: I was also one of those children throughout elementary and middle school that tutored my classmates; this also helped me to value difference and diversity and begin to develop respect for others and their perception of their surroundings and environment

and,

E: Early in my elementary school years, I was often in a position of leadership and confidence on the part of teachers and students. I felt trusted and valued, and this reinforced my belief that I could make a difference.

It would be interesting to do a longitudinal study to examine how early messages such as these influence an individual's career direction, particularly with regard to the helping professions. As an elementary and secondary school counsellor, I have the privileged position of being able to witness some of these processes in action.
2) Were There any Persons or Groups of Persons Who Influenced the Development of Your Personal Theory of Counselling?

The second primary research question was intended as a more focused examination of relational influences, as identified by Bogden’s and Biklen’s (1998) dimension three. Specific relationships in the participants’ lives, which influenced their ways of thinking about people and practice, were the main focus of this question. Again, it is understood that Bogden’s and Biklen’s dimension two traverses this focus.

As seen in the previous section, participants were more focused on relational influences than specific events and theoretical bodies of knowledge. The relevance of life experiences was mitigated through these individuals. It is difficult to draw arbitrary lines between experience and relationship, and as most counsellors are aware, the relationship is the experience.

For the purpose of analyzing Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) themes in the context of the present study, it did seem worthwhile to address these two influences separately, as they are addressed separately by the two research question. Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s theme 11, interpersonal encounters, was particularly relevant to examining the influence of relationships on theory building. However, the specific role of relationships on the development of personal theory also could be addressed effectively in light of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s theme 17, modeling and imitation.

*Interpersonal encounters (1, 4, 11, 12, 14, 17).*

When Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) posed questions about the impact of theories and research, they perceived that these factors would be of central importance for counsellor development. Their interviews with counsellors actually revealed that “relationships with clients, professors, supervisors, peers, colleagues, mentors, and one’s own therapist were more influential than empirically based bodies of knowledge” (p. 509). Skovholt and Ronnestad suggested, “Interpersonal experiences in both public and private domains were identified by the participants as being ‘essential in their development’” (p. 509). Examples of such experiences, in the public domain, include
interactions with clients, supervisors, professors, therapists, and peers and, in the private domain, include relationships with one’s children, parents, spouse, and friends.

Clients and professional elders were identified as having major influence, whereas theory and research played a lesser role than predicted. However, Skovholt and Ronnestad pointed out that “theory and research are not entirely set aside but were mediated through these individuals, and in this way, both people and knowledge were of importance” (p. 512). As was observed throughout chapter 4 of this study, participants were also able to conceptualize practice in the context of relational influences. Members of one’s family of origin played a significant role in this development, as was seen in this participants’ statement:

F: . . . So the way I was parented, the atmosphere created in the family . . . I was raised in a very positive family that put great value on responsibility and respect. I guess this has influenced my style as a clinician.

As was also observed in the findings of this study, relationships with clients, professors, supervisors, peers, colleagues, mentors, and one’s own therapist were influential not only in counsellor development but also in theory building, as indicated by this participant’s statement:

A: His way of working is Jungian/psychodynamic—and this has piqued my interest the most. My experience in working in the present moment, with the immediacy of what is currently happening between client and counsellor, and in addressing transference/counter transference has been something that I’ve learned can be extremely valuable.

Murdock et al.’s (1998) assertion that most counsellors could identify a primary theoretical influence even though they might consider themselves eclectic, also found support in this study. Reflecting on how earlier life experiences influenced personal theory was often discussed in the context of a particular theoretical orientation or style, yielding an understanding of therapeutic processes. This participant identified how personal therapy helped her to conceptualize the change process:

C: My early experiences with counselling allowed me to see parts of myself and, more importantly, to recognize when I am centered in my true Self. As a consequence, I am able to help clients achieve their stated goals by (a) helping
them to examine the goal and its consequences and (b) assist the client’s Self to assume its proper role as leader to guide the client through skilful internal dialogue, cooperation among the parts, positive reinforcement, and self befrienedment.

Understanding therapeutic change is a staple of theory building, and conceptualizing clients’ needs and processes is considered to be a major part of personal theory (Brammer, 1969). Personal experiences with the change process were cited by participants as highly influential in solidifying their perceptions of this process. As seen by this example above, participants saw relationships between their earlier life experiences as clients and the capacity to understand and believe in the change process.

Other examples of this insight pointed further to the ways that participants eventually adopted these experiences in their own theories:

E: A second experience was with a Jungian analyst trained in Zurich. I learned the importance of involvement and leadership by the client and the primary role of the unconscious contribution in change... Participants’ experiences as clients also helped them to gain a further insight into psychological processes present in the counselling dynamic, as was observed in this response. This participant revealed how personal therapy experiences enhanced her understanding of transference- subconscious attribution of qualities belonging to one person to someone else (Corsini & Wedding, 1995):

A: A couple of years after my brief sessions with him, I realized that what I had experienced with him was a lot of transference that was not successfully recognized and worked through. From this experience I realized the importance of identifying transference and working with it.

The findings of this study were consistent with Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) observation that theory was “mediated” through individuals and that earlier relational experiences, particularly with regard to encounters with one’s own therapist, did impact counsellor development and theory building. Six of the seven participants in this study stated that their personal work with therapists and counsellors was of primary influence in their professional development, which also supported Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s observation that beginning practitioners rely on external expertise at the
early stages of counsellor development. This observation was also consistent with theme 17, modeling and imitation.

*Modeling and imitation* (1, 4, 11, 14, 17).

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) suggested that modeling and imitation is a powerful and preferred learning method in the early (but not later) years of professional development. They asserted that beginning counsellors are absorbed with watching and imitating other experts—experts defined as writers of major theoretical approaches or techniques, respected local practitioners, professors or supervisors. Skovholt and Ronnestad suggested that newer members of the profession tended to idealize professional elders (e.g., professors, etc.), and the desire to learn from, model, and please such individuals was less observed in experienced members of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s sample. As the search for experts to imitate “takes on great salience early in one’s professional development” (p. 513), it is not surprising to see participants in the current study refer frequently to their mentors when describing the origins of their practice. As noted in theme 11, therapists played a major role in this development.

In addition to personal therapists, participants referred to university professors in the master’s in counselling program as playing a significant role in introducing them to theories they would eventually adopt as their own. This influence was particularly significant when professors not only taught these methodologies, but also had students experience them. These two participants cite examples of this:

**A:** Persons who have influenced my theory of counselling have been some of my teachers in the graduate counselling program . . . What I’ve learned from these prosfs has been through experience – not through didactics. In seeking support outside of the classroom, I have experienced first hand how they apply their own theories of counselling. It seems only in experience am I able to translate that to my own practice.

And:

**D:** My counselling theory has been influenced by my experience of graduate studies in that I have been exposed to a number of theoretical orientations, through reading and observation (guest speakers, prosfs, instructors, peers).
Hearing how professionals put the theory into practice in their counselling makes the theory come alive for me, and opens up my way of perceiving that particular theory.

The findings revealed that experts, significantly university professors and therapists, played an important role in introducing participants to theories they would eventually adopt as their own. Although responses in the study did not overwhelmingly focus on moving beyond these academic influences to "expanding on their own [counselling] style" (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 513), there was some indication that this was in progress.

Disillusionment with professors and programs was not observed by beginning counsellors in this sample as was observed in Skovholt's and Ronnestad's (1992) study, and members of this sample did not make specific reference to feeling unprepared for what was required of them post graduation.

Summary of Findings

This study examined the potential influence of earlier life experiences on the development of beginning counsellors' personal theories of counselling. By identifying experientially unique ways counselling students make meaning of creating their personal theories, the process aimed to illuminate that counsellor development was closely intertwined with theoretical orientation (Spruill & Benshoff, 2000). As little research has been done to examine developmental factors contributing to beginning counsellors' early practices and development of personal theories (Spruill & Benshoff, 2000) it boded well to examine factors that contributed to this aspect of counsellor development.

The primary research question guiding this study, Do earlier life experiences influence graduate students' personal theories of counselling? was posed to affirm whether or not the process of creating a personal theory of counselling was influenced developmentally by life experiences, particularly at the early stages of theoretical inception and particularly during graduate school.

The significance of the findings of this study lies in their potential to extend counsellor educators' and practicum supervisors' knowledge of the early processes involved in developing personal theories of counselling. Understanding beginning
counselors' conscious, and perhaps subconscious, motives behind the initial selection and design of theoretical orientation may provide a useful framework for structuring training programs and theory courses to better attend to counselors' needs (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992; Spruill & Benshoff, 2000).

A qualitative method using a phenomenological design was chosen for the study. A five-item questionnaire and individual interview were used to explore two major research questions: (a) Have your earlier life experiences influenced in any way the development of your personal theory of counseling? If so describe any specific experience(s) that influenced your theory; and (b) Were there any persons or groups of persons who influenced the development of your personal theory of counseling? If so describe how these persons or groups of persons influenced the development of your personal theory.

The literature and research on adult, student, and counselor development proved a useful adjunct in conceptualizing this study's findings, in both the thematic analysis and in Skovholt's and Ronnestad's (1992) study. Although the study did not seek to reveal explicit or separate connections between theory building and adult /counselor developmental stages, it did reveal that developmental processes were at work, particularly as so many references were made to family of origin and university experiences. This observation was compatible with Granello and Hazler's (1998) assertion that the adult status of the counseling students placed them in a mode of learning and development that appeared unique to this population. This status was most evident in the commonality seen in the language of this study's participants, as was revealed when determining categorizations for the thematic analysis.

As revealed by the thematic analysis, and comparison to Skovholt's and Ronnestad's (1992) study, the research question was directly and affirmatively answered by all seven participants. Participants in this study cited examples in which their earlier life experiences influenced not only personal and professional development, but also their personal theories of counseling.

Participants' theory development was impacted by normative and difficult life experiences in their families of origin, early education, post-secondary education, and in
counselling. Interpersonal relationships with parents, siblings, significant others, teachers, university professors, and counsellors also influenced participants’ personal theories.

In the context of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) study, inferences could be made about beginning counsellors and theory, particularly in light of themes 1, 3, 4, 5, 11, 12, 17, and 20. Most relevant to the research question was Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s assertion that theory was “mediated” through individuals (p. 512). In support of this observation, all seven participants in this study described experiences in which relationships with others had both a direct and indirect impact on their personal theory development. These influences included modeling and imitation, experiences with suffering and the influence of experts.

Skovholt and Ronnestad’s (1992) suggestion that modeling and imitation is a powerful and preferred learning method in the early (but not later) years of professional development found support in this study, as did their assertion that beginning counsellors are absorbed with watching and imitating other experts—experts defined as writers of major theoretical approaches or techniques, respected local practitioners, professors or supervisors. Experts, significantly therapists, played an important role in introducing this study’s participants to theories they would eventually adopt as their own.

In addition to therapists, university professors played a major role in theory development, however, responses in this study did not indicate overwhelmingly that there was a focus on moving beyond these academic influences to “expanding on their own [counselling] style” (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 513). There was some indication that this was in progress.

Individuation and integration of the professional and personal self was evident as participants spoke of experiences—both negative and positive—that indicated that they were becoming differentiated from family of origin. Life experiences, including graduate studies and relationships with others, especially one’s therapist, influenced personal and professional growth, and enabled participants to become more autonomous, particularly with regards to values acquisition.

All seven participants included statements about the impact of earlier experiences on their values, and identified how these tied in with their personal theories. This finding supported Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) assertions that “professional development
is growth towards individuation” (p. 507) and “individuation involves an increasingly higher order integration of the professional and personal self in which there is a strong consistency between ideology—one’s values and theoretical stance and methods and techniques used by the individual” (p. 507).

Participants’ statements in the present study did not overwhelmingly support Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) observation that “compatibility with self seemed to prevail over the need to ascribe to empirically based theory, or theoretical choices in graduate school as the counselor becomes more professionally individuated” (p. 510), but responses did indicate that the need for compatibility with self was in many cases at least equal to the need to ascribe to empirically based theory. This observation may be consistent with the professional juncture of the graduate students in this study.

Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) observation that “extensive experience with suffering produces heightened tolerance and acceptance of human variability,” (p. 514) directly aligned the role of life experience to counsellor development and practice. This phenomenon related to statements made by participants in this study regarding both normative and difficult life experiences. Difficult life experiences were particularly influential with regards to theory building, and empathy development. Participants’ responses resonated with Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s observations that “Personal life strongly influences professional functioning.” (p. 513), and “through the process of living one’s life as an adult, a variety of experiences, including personal disappointments and choices, help to make the individual less judgmental of others” (p. 514).

Findings of this study expanded beyond Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) premise that values development was an adult-oriented process. Participants in the present study included the impact of earlier life experiences in childhood on their personal and professional development. This suggested that values development as related to one’s eventual frames was not limited to an adult-oriented process. Early messages offered by teachers, parents and peers not only made an impact on participants’ future directions and decisions to become counsellors, but also influenced the development of their core counselling skills.
Conclusions

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) suggested that “the personal life of the therapist/counsellor is instructive”, and “through the process of living one’s life as an adult, a variety of experiences, including personal disappointments and choices, help to make the individual (counsellor) less judgmental of others” (p. 514). In relation to how life experiences impact personal theory building, Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992’s observation provided the foundation for continuing to investigate how life experiences influenced one’s professional paradigms.

The findings of the study revealed that the personal life of the counsellor was instructive and influential in several philosophical and professional domains as illuminated by the two modes of data analysis. The study’s findings also extended the concept that the personal life of the therapist/counsellor is instructive, to identifying the influence of earlier life experiences on personal theory building.

The next chapter will conclude the thesis, and present the discussion of these findings in terms of limitations and implications for future practice and research agendas.
Chapter 5: Implications for Research and Practice

This chapter presents the discussion of the study’s findings in terms of limitations and implications for future practice and research agendas. The first section will examine the study’s two primary limitations, the second section will present recommendations for future research to include both qualitative and quantitative approaches, and the third section presents three suggestions for future practice in counsellor education and theory building.

Limitations

As stated earlier, the human experience is of a highly mutable nature, and one study alone cannot encompass the whole picture of the phenomenon under investigation (Tesch, 1990). It is difficult to make predictions about graduate students’ experiences, particularly in light of the diverse cultural and relational fields that behold them. The master’s in counselling students who participated in this study should not be considered representative of counselling students in general, and no attempts were made to determine global characteristics of this group of individuals. Granello (2002) reminded us that any models derived from developmental research must be used only as general guide to reflect the diversity of counselling students.

In light of the findings, two specific limitations to the present study should be noted. First, as predicted, there was the lack of demographic variability in the sample: all participants were graduates in the same university counselling program, and 70% of the sample was female. A subsequent study drawing upon a larger sample from a wider geographic range of counsellor education programs would likely strengthen external validity and generalisability. However, as the gender imbalance typically reflects the lack of diversity in counselling programs (Granello, 2002) this result may well be observed in a larger sample.

A second limitation, which affected external validity of the results, openly acknowledges the “experimenter bias” of the researcher, as I am affiliated with the same master’s in counselling program as the participants. Because of my “intimate connection
with the phenomena being studied" (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 8), the element of bias clearly reduced the generalisability of this study. However, this close connection could be corrected for in subsequent studies by (a) following the suggested protocol stated in the first limitation, increasing and diversifying the sample, and (b) ensuring that the researcher would not be affiliated with any of the participants’ universities.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was conducted as qualitative research, and although this methodology seemed most appropriate to the investigation, it is possible to consider the problem using other methodological approaches. This section presents suggestions for future research including both quantitative and qualitative research approaches.

**Quantitative Approaches**

The participants’ demographic information revealed a consistency with findings of the two studies discussed in chapter 2, particularly with regard to trends concerning selection of integrative and client-centered approaches (Coan, 1979; Finch et al., 1992; Murdock et al., 1998; Prochaska & Norcross, 1983; Tremblay et al., 1986; Warner, 1991). All seven participants ascribed to an integrated approach to counselling, each citing an average of four different methodologies in their theoretical profiles. Client-centered approaches were included in 95% of participants’ lists of theoretical orientations, followed closely by cognitive/behavioural approaches (90%), solution focused (80%), and narrative/constructivist (75%).

Although selection of orientation was primarily integrative, participants were also able to identify specific theoretical preferences, particularly when speaking about relational influences with external experts. This preference related with Murdock et al.’s (1998) and Halgin’s (1985) assertions that most counsellors could identify and align with a primary theoretical influence even though they might consider themselves eclectic.

Future quantitative studies could continue to examine trends in theoretical orientation, as these appear to be useful in determining interests and directions for counsellor educators. A possible future study using a 2 X 2 X 2 (university-by-theoretical orientation-by-practicum) factorial analysis of variance could possibly determine if there
were significant differences in preferences on the basis of demographic characteristics and practicum experience. The study also would look at the influence of specific educational institutions on theoretical selection by doing an analysis of orientation as related to university programs. This result can be seen somewhat in the present study with strong preference seen for three main approaches.

Another study could survey counsellors about how theory evolved and use a statistical analysis to compare similarities regarding what was important to them. Asking counsellors what events or persons most impacted the development of their personal theory of counselling could provide statistical support for some of the phenomena revealed by this study. A similar structure could ask participants what activities would be useful in counsellor education to better promote theory development.

As this study also revealed a great deal about the significance of the influence of therapists on theoretical selection, a quantitative study could use a statistical analysis to survey graduate students on which person or groups of persons most influenced the development of their theoretical preference.

**Qualitative Approaches**

When looking strictly at the demographic variables of participants in this study, some interesting relationships emerged between age and experience and the preference for behavioural approaches. Both participants aged 51 and 53 included cognitive behavioural approaches in their list of methodologies, as did a 38-year-old participant with 11 years' counselling experience. Similarly, positive relationships between age and experience and the preference for behavioural approaches were also found in Loesch's and McDavis' (1978) study. This relationship partially supports the notion that theoretical selection may be a developmental process influenced by age and experience.

Murdock et al. (1998) asserted that developmental factors are at work in theoretical selection and believed that adopting a theoretical orientation was "not a one time static decision but rather a developmental process" (p. 12). They also believed that documenting the variables linked to theoretical orientation could help to increase awareness of the values and assumptions that influence counsellors' work with clients.
This could enable them to become more thoughtful about the consequences of their practice.

Murdock et al. (1998) were also consistent with Loesch and McDavis (1978) in believing that understanding these choices would be helpful to counsellor educators and supervisors as they help students to become professionals. In addition to identifying the roots of their understanding of counselling processes, participants in this study were able to make such connections, and in part, identification of these connections addressed Murdock et al.’s and Loesch’s and McDavis’ recommendations. The results of this study also in part supported Murdock et al.’s (1998) hypothesis that “adopting a theoretical orientation is not a one time static decision but rather a developmental process” (p. 12) influenced by philosophical assumptions, interpersonal control, and theoretical match between respondents. Although participants’ statements did not reveal strong connections between theoretical match and supervisors, the statements did reveal that professors and personal therapists did have a strong influence on theoretical orientation.

Future research using a qualitative methodology could further analyze connections between choice of theory and persons of influence by asking open-ended questions about the roots of the participants’ interest in certain methodologies. Through a narrative-style questionnaire or interview, participants could be asked questions about which person or groups of persons most influenced their choice of methodology and why, or “which persons or groups of persons most influenced your understanding of practice?” A thematic analysis could be used to interpret the results.

Implications for Future Practice

Brammer (1969) rationalized the need for conceptualizing frameworks to organize the integrative practices of counsellors and help them synthesize and explicate processes involved in helping. Brammer suggested that in addition to learning about established theoretical approaches, counsellors needed to develop their own style and theory of helping and organize this into a personal theory of counselling. All of the study’s participants demonstrated a commitment to practicing in a truly authentic way that reflected both educational and personal influences.
In the context of examining the impact of life experiences, participants were able to reflect on their theories and identify assumptions about human nature and therapeutic processes. Participants' earlier life experiences were cited as influential in solidifying their knowledge in these domain, and experiential influences, particularly personal work with professional therapists and counsellors, were revealed to have a major impact on this development. When considering these findings, it bodes well to continue to reflect on developmental influences when determining future directions for theory building in counsellor education.

Granello and Hazler (1998) recognized the need for a developmental approach to counsellor education with their observation that adult development, counsellor development, and college student development are intertwined. Granello and Hazler suggested that counsellor education was best addressed in a developmental context and theorized that developmental models had “the potential to enhance learning by providing theoretical justification for presenting material in a particular order or with a particular learning style based on the level of the counselling graduate student” (p. 90). In the context of the findings of this study, Granello and Hazler’s recommendation receives further support as participants revealed how developmental influences rooted in earlier life experiences influenced theory development and practice.

_Counsellor Developmental Stages and Theory Building_

In support of future directions with regard to specifically addressing theory building from a developmental perspective, Murdock et al. (1998) stated that “supervisees’ conceptions of theoretical orientations and associated interventions were probably different at different levels of development” (p. 13). As revealed in the findings of this study, theoretical beliefs and values resulting from earlier life experiences were clearly rooted in different life stages. Participants in this study derived theory building knowledge from a wide range of experiences, ranging from early childhood to university graduate level. In light of this observation, it is not too far a leap to assume that personal theory building is an integrated developmental process.

Spruill and Benshoff (2000) used this hypothesis that theory building is an integrated developmental process to build a case for presenting a three-stage framework
for theory building based on Ronnestad's and Skovholt's counsellor developmental stages (pretraining, training, post training). They observed that “linking theory building to the counsellor development stages is an important aspect of optimizing student learning and professional development” (p. 71), as current approaches de-emphasize life experiences before graduate training and “fail to incorporate counsellor developmental stages” (p. 71). Spruill's and Benshoff's model included many suggestions for presenting theory building activities in a certain developmental order, and this study also assisted with highlighting specific areas in which theory building could be strengthened. The area of counsellor values could lend itself well to an in-depth exploration.

Values and theory were frequently referenced simultaneously in the current study, and this should not go unnoticed when considering future directions. It was evident throughout the study that participants could not discuss how their theoretical frames of reference were impacted by earlier life experiences without bringing their values into play. The next section elaborates further on this point.

Values Clarification Exercises and Theory Building

The pretraining stage in which counsellors draw upon their natural helping abilities and are concerned with using knowledge from their life experiences (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992), is an ideal launching point for inclusion of activities that encourage counsellors to reflect on the origins of their values, as related to personal theory development. As the origin of cultural values and beliefs seemed particularly relevant to participants in this study, exercises in reflecting on this component of theory development would be useful.

Kelly (1995) recognized that values, in conjunction with persisting intentions, operated integratively throughout the counselling process. Kelly also supported the need for more work in the area of examining connections between values and practice: “A key context and process variable missing from most process research is counsellor and client’s values” (p. 343), and “Further research is needed to clarify how and to what extent such values affect counselling process and outcome” (p. 341). To some extent the study’s research question addressed Kelly’s recommendation by explicating some of the connections between the participants’ values attribution and counselling practice.
Participants' responses in this study illuminated that values rooted in childhood, and earlier life impacted belief systems on several domains:

A: That I have the resources (psychological, emotional, intellectual, and physical capacities that I do I attribute to the loving, caring, and supportive environment in which I grew up in.

Personal perspectives were volunteered by participants without any prompting from the researcher, revealing in part that counselling theory could not be discussed without acknowledging origins of values, in particular values as related to cultural issues. This phenomenon, frequently observed in this study, may be reflective of the mandate of the participants' program to include a multicultural component in all course offerings or simply a reflection of a more tolerant society in general. The efficacy of this counsellor education program to produce counsellors with such an inclusive world view was certainly worth noting.

Exercises in reflection have been proven to be effective teaching tools in counsellor education. The Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 1999) recommended that counsellors should be able to “identify key events in their lives that contributed to the development of their belief systems and explain how these events contributed to values development” (1999, p. 90). They also recommended that counsellors engage in “a self-exploration of their religious, spiritual, and transpersonal beliefs that support or hinder respect and valuing of different belief systems and cultures” (p. 90). The exercise of responding to research questions re-emphasized the importance of such activities as participants in this study were able to dialogue openly about their “cultural and ethnic blind spots” (Corey & Callanan, 1998, p. 342) and beliefs about human nature. This result could not be overlooked when considering the importance of continuing to include such activities in counsellor education and personal theory building.

Finch et al. (1992) proposed a procedure to help counselling students define their beliefs about people and their behaviours to assist with helping to identify personal beliefs about counselling theory. This process required students to respond to 50 statements, by either disagreeing or agreeing, and subsequent class discussions were held to reveal how congruent their theory was with these personal belief systems. When
piloted with 200 students, the exercise revealed that students who were personally and professionally congruent expressed more confidence than students who were not. This type of activity could be useful when applied at the beginning strategies of theory building, as it helps new counsellors clarify belief systems before they try to create a paradigm that may prove to be incompatible with their personalities. Colleagues have shared with me that the personal theory exercise was shelved after receiving its mark, as it was considered just another academic exercise amidst an already heavy workload. An exercise as proposed by Finch et al. (1992) potentially could make theory building more meaningful to students.

Many of the recommendations cited here come with a caveat about designing any learning activity that is expected to meet the needs of the diversity seen among counselling students. Granello (2002) reminded us that counselling students “display much developmental variability at any level of their program” (p. 292) and that any models derived from developmental research must be used only as general guide. He cautioned against using learning methods in a prescriptive fashion and suggested adapting these to meet the needs of the diversity in the classroom. Granello felt that it may be possible to use a generalized developmental model to improve educational experiences of counsellor education students, but no single model can adequately address the unique experiences of all students. As a student I would tend to agree.

The Importance of Personal Therapy

Actual therapeutic experience provided counsellors with a “parsimonious set of deeper level schemata that can be activated consistently to assist in conceptualizing individual clients” (Cummings et al., 1990, p. 132). As was observed in this study, participants’ responses revealed that the observation of the practices of others from an experiential and educational perspective was highly relevant to their understanding of personal theory. Corey’s and Callanan’s (1998) assertion that “those who expect to counsel others should know what the experience of being a client is really like” (p. 39) gained much support in this study, which further illuminated the importance of actual therapeutic experience to understanding practice.
Ninety percent of participants in the current study had participated in their own personal therapy, despite the fact that it was not a mandatory part of their master’s in counselling program. Personal counselling was cited as extremely influential, and participants saw valuable connections between these experiences and their abilities to practice in a truly authentic and informed way. Also hard to ignore was the strong relationship between participants’ choice of methodology as a practicing counsellor and theoretical orientations of their personal therapists. Ninety percent of participants’ theoretical orientations directly aligned with the practices of their own therapists!

Both recent and historical experiences as clients influenced participants’ selection of theoretical orientation and deepened their understanding of psychological processes, particularly with regard to therapeutic change. When personal counselling took place earlier in the participant’s life, the connections between one’s eventual working paradigm and one’s actual practice were not as explicit as they were for recent therapy experiences, but participants still were able to reflect on how these early experiences as clients impacted their eventual practice.

Murdock et al.’s (1998) suggestion that more research is needed on how counsellors think about and use theory as they gain therapy experience gains further credibility in light of this study. The results pointed clearly to the importance of doing personal work with experienced therapists, and several of the responses indicated that these experiences were long term: “The three long-term experiences I had as a client mirrored my path in developing a personal theory of counselling.” In support of this participant, Corey et al. (1998) stated that “Truly committed professionals engage in life long self examination as a means of remaining self aware and genuine” (p. 43).

The findings in this portion of analysis were perhaps the most influential component of all of the raw data collected and most related to how my own life experiences influenced my personal theory of counselling. In my theory assignment written in 1999, I referred to de Shazer’s (1993) statement: “The art of playing a ‘language game’ (such as psychotherapy) requires a consciousness that stands with one foot in the domain of ‘reality’ and the other in the ‘non reality’ domain of possibilities” (p. 87). This statement best described where I saw myself situated in the process of trying to create a theory that accurately represented my beliefs and experiences. Most
interestingly, I actually never discussed *any* of my personal experiences in my personal theory paper, and upon reflection, I cannot imagine how I could have overlooked such an integral part of the theory building process!

Somehow over the years I must have reflected on this missing component of my personal theory of counselling in order to end up with the research question of this study. I believed, and still do, that my own earlier life experiences had a great impact on my theory, most significantly my own personal work with experienced therapists. My field journal stated this in the first few pages:

My own experiences as a client have had more influence on my personal theory of counselling than any other factor, and I believe it still does. My personal work most influenced my choice of theoretical orientation, which is primarily constructivist and feminist. When researching orientations for my theory assignment, I realize now that I had searched for paradigms that best matched what I had experienced and believed was valuable. I am aware that this is not how all of the participants selected their orientations, but will be highly sensitized to results that correlate this preconception. I believe an excellent follow-up to any results I receive would be to do a quantitative study on to what extent the theoretical orientation of beginning counsellors reflects the theoretical orientation of their personal therapists. (January 30, 2002)

I recalled one particular interaction with a participant in their individual interview that really resonated with my own experience:

**Researcher:** If any of these earlier life experiences did influence your personal theory, which events, or persons were most influential to you? What would be the first thing that comes to mind?

**A:** My strongest thing has been my experience as a client. It’s been my strongest thing. And the rest was kind of grasping at straws, like digging a little bit, like what else could possibly be as related. It’s not just, it didn’t just come out of thin air, um, but actually when I went to my first counsellor.

I remember catching myself thinking, “Yes, what *else* could possibly be related?” However, since this was one of the first interviews I did, I soon found out that a *variety* of earlier life experiences related to how theory was developed, not just this one. But had
this focus not emerged in the research, I believe there would have been a lot of gaps. This observation speaks volumes about the importance of personal therapy and its impact on counsellor development and personal theory building.

I agree with Corey and Callanan (1998) that the opportunity to use therapy to re-examine and challenge beliefs and behaviours potentially can increase "effectiveness in working with clients" (p. 43). Evidence from this study clearly pointed to connections between participating in personal therapy and a strengthened foundation for theory building. In light of this observation, counsellor education programs may well benefit from acknowledging that these influences do provide a deeper understanding of therapeutic processes, and it would behove them to reconsider making personal therapy with external experts a mandatory portion of graduate programs.

Summary and Conclusions

As little research has been done to assist counsellor educators and practicum supervisors with furthering their understanding of how beginning counsellors develop their personal theories (Spruill & Benshoff, 2000), it seemed logical to proceed with this study. The study proposed to support the effectiveness of identifying developmentally and experientially unique ways that counselling students make meaning out of creating their personal theories as heuristics for indicating their personal processes. This focus was predicated on the notion that counsellor development is closely intertwined with theoretical orientation (Spruill & Benshoff, 2000).

As was observed in the thematic analysis of the present study, life experiences, counsellor development, and theory building were closely linked. All seven participants in this study cited clear examples in which their earlier life experiences influenced not only their personal and professional development as counsellors, but also their theories. Participants’ overall responses to the primary research could also be directly related to three or more of Skovholt’s and Ronnestad’s (1992) themes regarding counsellor development.

In light of the findings, two specific limitations to the present study were noted. First, there was the lack of demographic variability in the sample, and second, the
external validity and generalisability of the results is influenced by the researcher’s affiliation with the same master’s in counselling program as the participants.

Although this study was conducted as qualitative research, it is possible to consider the problem using quantitative methodological approaches, particularly if qualitative data is utilized as a foundation. Several suggestions for quantitative research were presented for consideration including factorial analysis of variance to determine if there were significant differences in theoretical preferences on the basis of demographic characteristics and practicum experience.

The findings yielded implications for future practices including a developmental approach to theory building based on the observation that adult development, counsellor development, and college student development are intertwined, exercises in reflection to enhance values clarification in theory development, and making personal therapy with external experts a mandatory portion of graduate programs.

Considering that counsellors in graduate programs have the potential to contribute to the pool of established models of counselling and psychotherapy with their own theories and expertise, it seems logical that counsellor educators and practicum supervisors do whatever they can to improve the facilitation of this process. I am confident that the findings of this study will further illuminate ways to enhance theory building in this domain.
References


Appendices
Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Notice

If you in any year of the Masters in Counselling program- including up to 2 years post graduation, and have developed your own personal theory of counselling (as required by your theories course, Ed D 518)), you are invited to participate in a study entitled "Do earlier life experiences influence graduate students' personal theories of counselling?" The study is being conducted by Carol Walling, a Masters in Counselling student at the University of Victoria.

The purpose of this study is to examine the potential influence of earlier life experiences on the development of beginning counsellors' personal theories of counselling.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to extend counsellor educators' knowledge of the processes involved in students' development of their personal theories of counselling. Understanding counselling students' thinking behind the development of their personal theories has potential implications for course design and program development in counsellor education. It may also assist practicum supervisors with understanding how students' earlier life experiences may influence their early practices and choices of interventions. In addition to these contributions, participation in this research may provide participants with better self-understanding in their development of a personal theory of counselling, and development as a counsellor.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in the research, your participation will include the following: First, you will fill out a questionnaire that will take you approximately one hour to complete. Second, you will participate in a 90-minute meeting in which you will review your responses on the questionnaire, and then be interviewed about the earlier life experiences that may have influenced the development of your personal theory of counselling. The interview will take place in confidentiality in one of the seminar rooms in the MacLaurin building at the University of Victoria. I will be audio taping the interview. Third, a second meeting will be scheduled at a later date to go over the transcript of the interview to identify any inaccuracies. The review of the interview transcript will take approximately one hour of your time.
Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without explanation or consequence. Your anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained during and after participation in the study. If you are interested, provide the information requested below and take this to the Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies office on the fourth floor of MacLaurin, and give it to Lorrie. I will call you to discuss your participation in the study. If you have any further questions about this recruitment please contact me at 250 389 8333, or email carolwalling@shaw.ca.

Name: .................................. Phone #: .................................

Year in Masters Program: ....
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA
OFFICE OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT, RESEARCH
HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Participant Consent Form Template

“Do Earlier Life Experiences Influence Graduate Students’ Personal Theories of Counselling?”

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled “Do earlier life experiences influence graduate students’ personal theories of counselling?” The research is being conducted by Carol Walling who is a graduate student in the Masters in Counselling Program in the Department Of Psychological Foundations and Leadership Studies at the University Of Victoria. You may contact her if you have further questions by phone at 250 389 8333 or by email at carolwalling@shaw.ca.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Masters of Arts in Counselling. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Max Uhlemann and Dr. Wanda Boyer. You may contact Dr. Max Uhlemann at 721 7827 / e-mail muhleman@uvic.ca, and Dr. Wanda Boyer at 721 7814 / e-mail wboyer@uvic.ca.

The purpose of this research is to examine the potential influence of earlier life experiences on the development of beginning counsellors’ personal theories of counselling. The development of a personal theory of counselling is a central aspect of first year graduate students’ program of study.

The significance of the study lies in its potential to extend counsellor educators’ knowledge of the early processes involved in students’ development of their personal theory of counselling. Understanding counselling students’ thinking behind the development of their personal theories has potential implications for course design and program development. It may also assist practicum supervisors in understanding how students’ earlier life experiences may influence their early practices and choices of interventions.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a graduate student currently enrolled in any year of the Masters in Counselling program at the University Of Victoria and up to 2 years post graduation. You have also completed the Seminar in Counselling Psychology graduate course (Ed D 518), hat requires students to develop their own personal theory of counselling.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include three components: 1) Completing a questionnaire entitled “Looking at the Influence of Earlier Life Experiences on the Development of your Personal Theory of Counselling”. This will take approximately one hour to complete; 2) Reviewing the questionnaire with me, and then being interviewed about how your earlier life experiences may have influenced the development of your personal theory of counselling. This will take approximately one and a half hours of your time. The interview will be audio taped; and 3) Reviewing the interview transcript with me to identify any inaccuracies. This will take approximately one hour of your time.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, in regard to the time required to participate. The only possible risk that might be present from participation in this research is that the recall of earlier life experiences that influenced the development of a personal theory may lead to an upsetting memory. Thus, before completing the questionnaire and participating in an interview, I will briefly discuss this potential with you, and reiterate that you may withdraw from the study at any time if you do not feel comfortable. In addition, you may also choose not to answer any given interview question. If it is needed I will provide you with a list of referrals for counselling services on and off campus.
The potential benefits of participation in this research include contributing to a body of knowledge which may influence aspects of counsellor education programs: 1) this knowledge has potential implications for course design and program development, and 2) this knowledge may assist practicum supervisors in understanding how students' earlier life experiences influence their early practices and choices of interventions. In addition, participation in this research may provide you with better self-understanding in your development of a personal theory of counselling, and development as a counsellor.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any explanation or consequence. If you do withdraw from the study, your data will not be used in the analysis unless you provide me with your consent to do so.

Participation in this research will have no bearing on your degree requirements in the program, and no faculty member will be advised of your participation. In addition, previous coursework (Ed D 518) will not be quoted or presented in any way that might identify you. In terms of protecting your anonymity, the researcher will be the only one present at the interviews. In the written material personal names will be replaced with numbers, and any names I use will be replaced by pseudo names. Any raw data (completed questionnaires, tapes transcripts of interviews) that will need to be shared during the research process, will be purged by the researcher of all characteristics which could potentially reveal the identity of the participants, or any mentioned parties. This process will eliminate names and attributes associated with participants prior to sharing with others. The only individuals who will have access to the purged raw data will be:

1) Thesis Committee Members: It is possible but not likely probable, that the members of the thesis committee may request to see the interview transcripts and completed questionnaires. There is absolutely no possibility that these individuals will be listening to the audiotapes of the interview.

2) Transcript Secretary: A professional secretary, not affiliated in any way with the EPLS department, University of Victoria, or research participants, will type up the transcripts from the audio taped interviews.

3) Researcher's Assistant (Inter-rater): An independent expert who is not affiliated in any way with the EPLS department, University of Victoria, or research participants, will collaborate with the researcher to determine coding categories from written transcripts and completed questionnaires during the data analysis process. This is to ensure the study's reliability. There is absolutely no possibility that this individual will be listening to the audiotapes of the interview.

During stage 3 of the research process participants will be offered the opportunity to review the transcripts made of their interviews and edit out any information, which may compromise their anonymity. This process will take place prior to any potential sharing of transcripts with committee members, or the researcher's assistant (inter-rater).

Your confidentiality will also be protected and any information that I collect will remain in a locked cabinet in my residence. Three years after publication of the research findings, I will destroy all data collected on participants including, but not limited to; completed questionnaires, handwritten notes, audio taped interviews, computer disks and the interview transcripts. It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: 1) The information will be presented in my Masters thesis; 2) The findings may be presented at a professional conference; 3) The findings may be submitted to a professional journal.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4362). Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

____________________  __________________   __________________
Name of Participant   Signature         Date
Appendix C: Questionnaire

"Looking at the Potential Influence of Earlier Life Experiences on the Development of Your Personal Theory of Counselling"

**DEFINITIONS:**

**Personal Theory of Counselling:** A rationale for what one does, and why one is doing it, in the name of helping. It is a sophisticated form of common sense, which should contain basic assumptions about how people learn and change, how personality develops, and how motivation is generated. A personal theory should contain a philosophical dimension that includes one's values and expected outcomes (Brammer & MacDonald 1996).

**Theoretical Orientation:** One's primary choice of theory or theories of counselling (i.e. narrative, constructivist, cognitive, person centered, body centered, behavioural, etc).

**Theoretical Development:** The ongoing development of a counsellor trainee's working frame of reference for their counselling practice. This includes choice of theory, and development of a personal theory of counselling.

**PART I - PERSONAL DATA**

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<th>Primary Theoretical Orientation(s)</th>
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PART II - OPEN ENDED QUESTIONNAIRE

"Looking at the Influence Of Earlier Life Experiences On the Development of Your Personal Theory of Counselling"

As it is very important to protect your anonymity in this process, please do not include any information on this questionnaire, which might reveal your identity (names of individuals, locations etc). Also if you feel uncomfortable about responding to any given question please feel free to omit that selection.

Responses may be as “concise” as respondents choose. Most questions require some elaboration if respondents answer “yes” to a question. Please spend no more than sixty minutes on completing the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires may be given to me, or emailed. I will make a copy of the questionnaire for your records. Please contact me once you have completed the questionnaire and we will arrange a meeting time for the review of the questionnaire and interview. If you require clarification of any aspect of the questionnaire, please do not hesitate to contact me at 389-8333, or by email. carolwalling@shaw.ca.

QUESTIONS:

1) Have your earlier life experiences (losses, family of origin influences, life transitions, etc) influenced in any way the development of your personal theory of counselling? Describe any specific experience(s) that influenced your theory.
Questionnaire (cont’d)

2) Were there any persons or groups of persons who influenced the development of your personal theory of counselling? Describe how these persons or groups of persons influenced the development of your personal theory.

3) Have any of your earlier “non counselling,” related career experiences (i.e. teaching, management, sales etc) influenced the development of your personal theory? If so, please describe these experiences and their connections to your personal theory.

4) Have your earlier experiences as a client influenced the development of your personal theory? Please describe.

5) Do you believe your personal theory of counselling reflects your personality style, hobbies, interests, etc? If so, please describe.
Appendix D: Interview Questions

1) If earlier life experiences influenced your personal theory of counselling, which events were most influential? (15-20 mins)

2) If any person or groups of persons influenced your personal theory of counselling, which person or groups of persons were most influential and why? (15-20 mins)
Appendix E: Letter to Participants After the Interview

Subject: Review of the Themes / Analysis
Date:
Dear (Participant’s real name)

Thank you very much for taking time to share your thoughts and experiences about creating your personal theory of counselling. As I promised I am sending you an initial copy of the analyses of the questionnaires and interview. You are identified by the pseudonym_____

Please let me know if there is any portions you would like to have revised, or which may compromise you anonymity, and I will make those changes. In addition, if you would like to add to what you said or meant, I would be pleased to include more information. I have left a wide right margin on the document for any additional comments you may have. Please bring the document to our post-interview meeting, and we will discuss changes at that time. I will be contacting you to schedule a convenient date and time for our meeting.

Sincerely,

Carol Walling
Ph 250 389 8333
carolwalling@shaw.ca
Appendix F: Letter to Participants After the Review of the Analyses

Date:
Dear (Participant's real name)

Thank you for taking time to review the analyses. As promised, I am sending you a final copy of the analysis of the questionnaires and interview. You are identified by the pseudonym _______

Please let me know if there are any further revisions you would like to have made. Should you wish to discuss these changes in person we can arrange another post interview meeting. If you think we do not need another meeting, I have enclosed a self-addressed and stamped envelope so that you may mail me any additional changes that are needed (please make a note of these in the right hand margins). If no additional changes are needed, you do not need to send it back to me.

Thank you again, for your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Carol Walling