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Reflections on Describing and Descriptions of Self-Relations

by

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the Department of Psychological Foundations in Education

We accept this dissertation as conforming  
to the required standard

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Abstract

The influence an individual’s perspective has on her or his perceptions is a critical issue in the field of counselling. Counsellors are required to maintain a considerable level of self-awareness in order not to confuse their own experience with the experience of their client. It is proposed that an essential component of such self-awareness includes a knowledge of self-relations. The term self-relations implies both a self-structure - a relatively stable developmental integration of patterns and awarenesses - and the dynamic, shifting relationships within that self-structure.

This study addressed the question: “How do four counsellors describe their self-relations?” The purpose of the inquiry was to gain knowledge about a range of self-relations, from functional to problematic, therefore counsellors who work with individuals meeting diagnostic criteria of borderline personality disorder [BPD] were selected. Borderline personality disorder is significant to the study in that the most commonly cited criterion for this disorder is the experiencing of difficulties concerning self-integration.

Following a detailed methodological description of the interview and analysis procedures, the resulting themes are explicated. Themes emerged from four general categories: (a) events that took place in the interview, (b) personal themes, (c) professional issues, and (d) the interviewer’s

perspective. The principal finding was the identification of an inherent correspondence between the participants' self-relations and their therapeutic interventions. The manner in which figurative language constituted the individual styles of self-relations is explored.

Implications for practice include a discussion of dissociative processes that focuses on the significant qualitative difference between theoretical conceptions and lived experience. An exercise is included in the appendixes that assists in the process of describing self-relations. It is recommended that this exercise be included as a component of counsellor education.

Examiners:

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## Introduction

### Evolving from “Psychology During Pregnancy” to “Self-Relations”

Witnessing the birth of a child is, in my experience, one of life’s most profound events . . . When I first began assisting women through the childbearing year, many impressions flooded into my consciousness; over time, I distilled a sense that many issues for the woman and her family were not being addressed. (Snell, 1992, p. 1)

So begins the introduction to my Master’s thesis: *An Explication of Women’s Experience of an Alteration in Psychology During Pregnancy* (Snell, 1992). How then did I journey from studying psychology during pregnancy to exploring self-relations<sup>2</sup>? The answer to that question forms the content of the following introduction to this doctoral dissertation.

From the outset of my doctoral work it was my intention to continue researching in the area of psychological considerations during pregnancy. After all, I had worked diligently for many years acquiring substantive theoretical and practical knowledge in this area. A number of influences gradually shifted this intention, not the least of which was the opportunity made available through a seminar course, “Writing Research”, to consider the

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The term self-relations is meant to include a variety of conceptions of self-organization, such as: self-structure, internal working model of the self, self-integration, self-representations, self-reference, relations to own internal states, conceptualizing the self, and constructing the self. The use of any term implies the belief system from which it originates, the use of the term self-relations is intended to be as value-free as possible in order to allow easy movement within a variety of approaches and understandings of self theory. [A more thorough definition of self-relations is provided later in this section.]

question, “What am I *deeply* interested in?”

Such introspections led to an awareness that underlying the design and execution of the research for my Master’s thesis I had harboured an agenda to prove myself “right”. I realized that, despite sincere efforts to practice bracketing<sup>3</sup> throughout that research process, my strong opinions had influenced the results of the study. With this awareness came associated understandings of a personal nature concerning the embeddedness of my tendency to believe I am “right” in my convictions. It is from such introspections that the desire to ask a question I did not “know” the answer to developed.

As I struggled to decide the focus of my doctoral inquiry, I experienced further revelations that inspired the eventual formulation of the research question for this dissertation, “How do four counsellors describe their self-relations?” These revelations occurred after three doctoral students and myself formed a directed study group on current theories of self. In reaction to our growing dissatisfaction with the distance between the theory we were reading and our lived experience of being a self, we decided to conduct our own research (Arvay, Banister, Hoskins, & Snell, 1995). Our reading had

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Bracketing involves the researcher bringing to conscious awareness her or his presuppositions, assumptions, and premises about the topic and person under study. The researcher is expected to engage in a critical self-reflection throughout the research process and to utilize colleagues and supervisors to gain feedback in determining the effectiveness of the researcher’s efforts to listen without prejudice (Kvale, 1983; van Manen, 1990).

exposed us to a rich complexity of theory on the nature and character of the self and our resultant thinking and discussions had engendered such a maelstrom of personal theoretical confusion that we decided to bring some order to this situation.

We developed a research design that would enable us to investigate individual and common meaning-making constructs about “being a self”. We interviewed each other asking, “What is your experience of, or what is your theory of being a self?” The transcripts from these interviews were analysed individually and collectively by the four of us, and themes were identified.

We discussed and clarified our understanding of our lived experience of being a self and that understanding shifted and grew, causing us to further struggle with creating consensual boundaries around this spiralling, interactive process of increasing understanding and, therefore, changing data. As we negotiated categories and clarified meaning (a tremendous advantage to our methodology was that we could provide absolute insight into what each participant meant) we struggled with the esoteric nature of our topic and the challenges inherent in dealing with fluid data. Our discussions built one on the next until we were very familiar with each other’s “way of being a self”; or, rather, we were familiar with how we each presented, developed, and changed our conceptions of being a self. I believe the opportunity we created to have these discussions is unique, combining deeply personal awarenesses with academic intentions in a collaborative

research project.

Despite the degree of interest and excitement I felt from my involvement in this study, I persisted in the assumption that my dissertation study should derive directly from my Master's thesis. Accordingly, I continued my attempts to hone a question that met two criteria; one, the question would be about something I didn't "know" and, two, it would be, in some manner, connected with psychology during pregnancy.

One last event occurred that proved to be a catalyst in shifting my assumptions concerning the necessity of researching psychology during pregnancy. I was unexpectedly offered the possibility of changing my employment and the decision-making process that followed this offer resulted in a significant realization: I learned that my experience and knowledge are transferable within a range of situations. I also came to realize that I had been restricting myself in order to satisfy an underlying desire for a sense of continuity. I now appreciated that whatever I chose to study would be informed by my experience, and that the constancy I strove to maintain was present within *me*, not within any given area of interest.

The way was now clear to fully engage with the question, "What deeply interests me?" The answer to that question developed through a process of reflecting, talking to colleagues and committee members, and writing. I was initially drawn to learning more about a psychological event termed splitting. My awareness and understanding of my own history of

splitting behavior had developed as a result of participating in the previously mentioned doctoral research project [see Credibility for further discussion]. I became curious to know more about this behavior.<sup>4</sup>

I learned that such disruptions in self-integration are described as a diagnostic criterion of borderline personality disorder [BPD]. This knowledge began the process of refining my inquiry; I decided to focus on individuals experiencing problems with self-integration as described by the diagnostic criterion for BPD [see Literature Review for further discussion].

In developing the research question it became evident that it was the range of self-integration, from problematic to functional, that interested me. I defined self-integration as the interrelationship of an individual's various parts. Splitting behavior occurred when an individual could not integrate the affect generated in certain circumstances and subsequently split off an aspect of awareness.

The term self-integration did not quite capture what it was that interested me, although it was a facet of that interest. For a time I used the term self-reference as a descriptor of the *active* relationship an individual has with her or his self. Eventually I came to use the term self-relations, which

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Splitting is a term that may be used synonymously with dissociation [see Literature Review]. The DSM-IV describes this essential feature of the Dissociative Disorders as a “disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment. The disturbance may be sudden or gradual, transient or chronic” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 477).

includes the actual components of our experience of being a self (e.g., parts, roles, aspects, thoughts, feelings) and the relationship between such components. The term self-relations, therefore, implies both the self-structure - a relatively stable developmental integration of patterns and awarenesses [see Literature Review for further discussion] - and the dynamic, shifting, relationships within the self-structure. Put simply, self-relations is the *experience* of being the particular self that you are in varying contexts, both internal and external.

My focus now centered on understanding how individuals experienced their self-relations, including problematic self-relations. A discussion with a colleague resulted in the decision to interview counsellors in order to learn about their self-relations, and to learn about their perceptions of their clients' dissociative processes. The rationale for this decision rested in my assumption that therapists<sup>5</sup> working with dissociative clients could provide pertinent observations and treatment approaches concerning problematic self-relations. As well, I determined it was likely that such therapists would be informed and articulate in terms of describing their own self-relations.

The preference for obtaining the data through the interview process stems from my experience as a researcher using this methodology, and my occupation as a therapist. As an experienced therapist I feel confident in my

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<sup>5</sup> "Therapist" and "counsellor" will be used interchangeably throughout the text.

listening skills and my ability to facilitate exploration.

The foregoing chronology of the development of the research question is intended to provide the reader with an understanding of the context from which this study originates. My experience as an interviewee in our collaborative research study (Arvay et al., 1995) provided an essential understanding of my self-relations<sup>6</sup>, and that understanding deeply informs this study.

### Basis for Studying Self-Relations

In order to gain knowledge about self-relations in general, and about interruptions in self-relations, the site of the research focussed on four therapists who work with individuals meeting diagnostic criteria of borderline personality disorder [BPD]. An assumption underlying the research was that by interviewing such therapists a wealth of insight, experience, and expertise concerning self-relations would be made available for analysis. Osborne (1994) states that “there seems little doubt that descriptive research methods are particularly suited for exploring the meaning of human experience that can be accessed through personal communication” (p. 186).

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If the reader is interested in being further oriented to this study there is an exercise contained in Appendix A [Describing the experience of “being a self”] that involves putting into language the all-familiar-yet-rarely-described experience of self-relations. This study *can* be understood on a cognitive, academic level without having direct experience of the topic, however a certain richness and sense-making may be lacking.

It was my intention to gain an in-depth description of individual therapists' self-relations, how they understand their clients' dissociative behavior, and the manner in which these conceptions influence their work with these clients. I believed that therapists who work with clients meeting BPD diagnostic criteria would have developed, to varying degrees, theories around self-relations. This assumption arises, in part, from my reasoning that it can be illuminating to study something when it is not working properly in order to understand how it operates when it is functional.

Borderline personality disorder is significant to the study in that the most commonly cited criterion for this disorder is that of problems with self-integration. Kernberg (1993) describes the core "syndrome" of BPD as "identity diffusion". Stevenson and Meares (1992) maintain that "borderline personality disorder is a consequence of a disruption in the development of the self" (p. 358). Ryle and Marlowe (1995) state that "... discontinuity of experience and the impaired recollection of one state while in another is both caused by, and serves to reinforce, the absence of a central self-observing and self-managing capacity" (p. 23).

These theoretical observations on the nature and dynamics of borderline personality disorder not only provide conceptions that are useful in understanding individuals who experience difficulties associated with problematic self-relations, such theories also inform our knowledge of self-relations in general. The literature surrounding BPD provides descriptions of

self-structure that have been very useful for the purposes of this research study. Such descriptions, which are generally in agreement with each other, have provided a consistent reference point in the exploration of what is an abstract construction, that is, self-relations.

Although I have found the criteria that describe borderline personality disorder useful in identifying a population of clients and, therefore, therapists who struggle with, and work toward integrating self-states, I have considerable reservations regarding the practice of attaching a psychiatric label to an individual [see Assumptions Regarding Borderline Personality Disorder for further discussion].

Studying self-relations and problems with self-integration in order to gain a more thorough and useful understanding of self and self in therapy is necessary and important. Few resources provide a description of the experience of self-relations and there are fewer still that attempt to explain exactly what occurs in terms of self-relations when an individual experiences dissociation. Kroll (1993) claims that “there is a dimensional quality to the components of the borderline personality and that we all can be located somewhere on these dimensions” (p. 214). Building on his arguments, it is my belief that the behaviors and underlying factors that contribute to a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder are a matter of degree in comparison to other individuals, rather than unique to this disorder. Thus, it is also my contention that the study of self-relations and problematic self-

relations will result in information that mutually informs our knowledge of both.

To gain greater understanding the reader is encouraged to engage in a process of describing his or her own self-relations in order to have the experience of putting into words that which is all-familiar and yet quite likely has never been discussed. The purpose of encouraging the reader to engage in this process is twofold: the first is to allow for a richer, contextual understanding of the domain of this study; the second is to bring to the reader's awareness that within Western culture there is little opportunity to converse with others about the *experience* of being a self.

## Review of the Literature

### Overview

The following literature review is included in order to provide relevant, contextual information about the components of this study. The inclusion of borderline personality disorder in this study is due to its function as a descriptor of individuals who experience difficulties with self-integration. As well, the body of literature that has been built from the concept of “borderline” psychology contributes definitions and descriptions of influences on the development and experience of self-relations, for example, such literature provides a working definition of self-structure and its development. The history and contentious issues surrounding the term “borderline” are presented with the intention of providing the context from which the term arises.

*Splitting*, otherwise known as *dissociation*, an aspect of borderline personality disorder in particular, and a recognized psychological event in general, is defined and described in the following literature review. Such behavior is of specific interest to this research study.

Another key theoretical domain of this study is that of self theory. Accordingly, a brief orientation to a selected range of postulations and research concerning the concept of self has been included.

Preparation of the following review of the literature preceded the interviewing of participants and subsequent data analysis. An additional

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literature review was undertaken consequent to the emergence of unforeseen themes and concepts. The latter literature review is woven into the text throughout the dissertation.

### Borderline Personality Disorder

#### Definition of Borderline Personality Disorder

The fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, a publication by the American Psychiatric Association (1994) suggests nine criteria in diagnosing Borderline Personality Disorder [BPD]:

A pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

- (1) frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment. **Note:** Do not include suicidal or self-mutilating behavior covered in Criterion 5.
- (2) a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation
- (3) identity disturbance: markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self
- (4) impulsivity in at least two areas that are potentially self-damaging (e.g., spending, sex, substance abuse, reckless driving, binge eating). **Note:** Do not include suicidal or self-mutilating behavior covered in Criterion 5.
- (5) recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures, or threats, or self-mutilating behavior
- (6) affective instability due to a marked reactivity of mood (e.g., intense episodic dysphoria, irritability, or anxiety usually lasting a

few hours and only rarely more than a few days)

(7) chronic feeling of emptiness

(8) inappropriate, intense anger or difficulty controlling anger (e.g., frequent displays of temper, constant anger, recurrent physical fights)

(9) transient, stress-related paranoid ideation or severe dissociative symptoms

**cultural:** DSM-IV states that BPD has been identified in many settings around the world.

**gender:** 75% female

**prevalence:** 2% of general population, 10% of individuals in mental health clinics, 20% among psychiatric inpatients.

### Origins of the Term “Borderline”

There is a substantial body of literature on borderline personality disorder that details such areas as diagnostic criteria, treatment approaches, developmental difficulties, and psychodynamic structures. There is also a range of understandings on the origin and meaning of the term “borderline”. The textbook, *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life* (Carson, Butcher & Coleman, 1988) explains that individuals with borderline personality disorder show a pattern of behavior that is recognized as not only containing features of the personality disorders but also of the more severe psychological disorders, particularly the affective disorders. Therefore, the term borderline indicates a diagnostic distinction between two types of disorders.

Another viewpoint on the origin of the term borderline personality disorder comes from Herman (1992). She contends that somatization disorder, borderline personality disorder, and multiple personality disorder were once subsumed under the now obsolete term “hysteria”. The prominent features of these three disorders, namely the physioneurosis characteristic of somatization disorder, the deformation of consciousness prominent in multiple personality disorder, and the disturbance in identity and relationship common in borderline personality disorder, are “descriptive fragments of the condition that was once called hysteria” (p. 126).

Langley (1994) credits Adolph Stern, a psychoanalyst, with first using the term borderline in 1938. According to Langley, the diagnosis developed from the limitations of psychotherapeutic treatment at that time. That is, if a patient could not tolerate the stress associated with psychoanalysis then he or she was labelled “borderline”; originally this term meant “borderline schizophrenic”. The problem lay in the fact that the psychoanalytic reliance on technical neutrality and transference was fundamentally inappropriate for a client population whose main issues were abandonment and engulfment fears. Rather than acknowledge the limitations of psychoanalytic treatment, the “patient” was held responsible for the failure of the therapy. Thus was the beginning of a situation that exists to this day - clients with the label of “borderline” are considered “difficult” and untreatable.

### The Pejorative Label “Borderline”

The pejorative nature of the “borderline” label can be understood to arise from a number of sources, these include: historical attitudes, misogynistic tendencies, and the effect of the borderline client’s defense system in combination with the therapist’s own issues.

From the 1930s through the 1960s psychoanalysts focused on attempting to increase the ego strengths of their “borderline clients” who, overwhelmed by their difficulties in managing day to day life, would actually degenerate with treatment. Such a focus, in combination with the psychoanalytic reliance on the therapeutic relationship, guaranteed the continuing lack of progress in treating borderline clients. Therapists who were experiencing disrupted and counterproductive therapy with their borderline clients communicated with other therapists experiencing similar problems; thereby the stereotype and legend of the “difficult borderline client” was born and perpetrated (Langley, 1994).

To this day the term “borderline” is used as a pejorative label, denoting an uncooperative and hostile client. Herman (1992) states, “Some clinicians have argued that the term ‘borderline’ has become so prejudicial that it should be abandoned altogether, just as its predecessor term, *hysteria*, had to be abandoned (p. 123).”

It is likely not coincidental that the label “borderline” is most commonly applied to women, as was the diagnoses “hysteria”. Seventy-five

percent of those diagnosed with borderline personality disorder are female (Carson et al., 1988). Langley (1994) suggesting that iatrogenic factors account for the preponderance of women being diagnosed with BPD, adds that it is possible that women raised in the United States “are more subject to traumatic or BPD-inducing experiences than are men” (p. 29).

A possible factor in the preponderance of women being diagnosed with BPD is that certain behaviors are considered more pathological in women than in men. Waites (1993) suggests that women who demonstrate characteristics that are considered particularly undesirable in females are diagnosed with BPD far more often than males displaying the same behaviors, e.g., difficulties with impulse control, being excessively demanding rather than self-effacing.

The words of a woman diagnosed with borderline personality disorder speak to the suffering experienced by those subject to the prejudice surrounding this diagnosis:

I know that things are getting better about borderlines and stuff.

Having that diagnosis resulted in my getting treated exactly the way I was treated at home. The minute I got that diagnosis people stopped treating me as though what I was doing had a reason. All that psychiatric treatment was just as destructive as what happened before.

Denying the reality of my experience - that was the most

harmful. Not being able to trust anyone was the most serious effect ... I know I acted in ways that were despicable. But I wasn't crazy. Some people go around acting like that because they feel hopeless. Finally I found a few people along the way who have been able to feel OK about me even though I had severe problems. Good therapists were those who really validated my experience. (Herman, 1992, p. 128)

Another manner in which the term borderline has engendered negative reactions by psychotherapists is through the actual relationship between client and therapist. Masterson (1981) hypothesized that unresolved depressive feelings in therapists could facilitate countertransference reactions to borderline clients. A recent study (Rosenkrantz & Morrison, 1992) found that "certain dimensions of therapist personality, including type of depressive experience and preference for maintaining personal boundaries, would influence therapists' perceptions of themselves and patients ..." (p. 550). Therapists who had their own issues with dependency, neediness, feelings of loneliness, and fear of abandonment tended to react negatively to their borderline clients who struggle with these very issues.

### Etiology of Borderline Personality Disorder

A review of the literature on BPD and causation finds agreement that negative experiences contribute to the development of this disorder. Some sources include social factors (Waites, 1993), others focus strictly on early development (before three years) as the window period for the development of

BPD (Masterson, 1978). Currently many sources link a BPD diagnosis with childhood trauma (Briere, 1992; Reiker & Carmen, 1986; Zivney, Nash & Hulsey, 1988) and some theorists contend that BPD is associated with post traumatic stress disorder (Herman, 1992, Langley, 1994) [definition to follow].

Masterson (1978), perhaps the most well known Object Relations [OR] psychoanalyst who has written on this subject, claimed that the development of BPD was due strictly to the influences of a mother with BPD and that the damage occurred before the age of three. Over time Masterson has moderated his position to include the possibility of other (pathological) mothering factors that may contribute to the development of BPD (Langley, 1994).

According to Masterson (1978) it is during the separation (locomotion)-individuation (communication) process, when the toddler is struggling with the developmental task of dependency vs autonomy, that the mother damages the child by withdrawing her support. When tension develops around the toddler's efforts to be autonomous in thought, speech, feelings, and actions the integration of opposing qualities, e.g., all-good self image and all-bad self image, cannot occur. Without this integration the child experiences feelings of abandonment and shame. A false self, one that will not identify or activate individuated thoughts, is created to avoid triggering the mother's rejection or punishment for self expression.

Once this dynamic between mother and child has taken place,

Masterson (1978) asserts that the BPD-inducing developmental arrests cannot be reversed or neutralized. The child develops into an adult who reacts intensely to any loss or separation, has profound difficulty with rejection, and is extremely defensive.

In contrast to Masterson's explanation of the etiology of BPD, current sources claim that borderline personality disorder is trauma-based and that all individuals diagnosed with BPD have unresolved posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD] in their background (Herman, 1992; Langley, 1994). PTSD is diagnostically defined by the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) as:

**A.** The person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which both of the following were present:

- (1) the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others
- (2) the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.  
**Note:** In children, this may be expressed instead by disorganized or agitated behavior

**B.** The traumatic event is persistently reexperienced in one (or more) of the following ways:

- (1) recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions. **Note:** In young children, repetitive play may occur in which themes or aspects of the trauma are expressed.
- (2) recurrent distressing dreams of the event. **Note:** In children, there may be frightening dreams without recognizable content.
- (3) acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring (includes a sense of reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations, and

dissociative flashback episodes, including those that occur on awakening or when intoxicated). **Note:** In young children, trauma-specific reenactment may occur.

- (4) intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event
- (5) physiological reactivity on exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event

**C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (not present before trauma), as indicated by three (or more) of the following:**

- (1) efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma
- (2) efforts to avoid activities, places, or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
- (3) inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma
- (4) markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities
- (5) feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
- (6) restricted range of affect (e.g., unable to have loving feelings)
- (7) sense of a foreshortened future (e.g., does not expect to have a career, marriage, children, or a normal life span)

**D. Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma), as indicated by two (or more) of the following:**

- (1) difficulty falling or staying asleep
- (2) irritability or outbursts of anger
- (3) difficulty concentrating
- (4) hypervigilance
- (5) exaggerated startle response

**E.** Duration of the disturbance (symptoms in Criteria B, C, and D) is more than 1 month.

**F.** The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

*Specify if:*

**Acute:** if duration of symptoms is less than 3 months

**Chronic:** if duration of symptoms is 3 months or more

*Specify if:*

**With Delayed Onset:** if onset of symptoms is at least 6 months after the stressor

Langley (1994) contends that all individuals with BPD have a co-diagnosis of PTSD and there is no age limit on when the trauma has to have occurred. Langley's model presented in *Self-Management Therapy for Borderline Personality Disorder* maintains that it is the severity and repetitiveness of the trauma, not the timing of it, that leads to the development of BPD. Dissociation and damage to the self-structure are the links between BPD and PTSD according to Langley, who relies upon Kohut's work to explicate concepts of the self and self-structure.

The work of Heinz Kohut, who during the 1960s and 1970s developed the theory of self psychology, a post-Freudian version of psychoanalysis, describes the development of self out of self-object experiences (Langley, 1994).

Kohut describes the "self" as it

...refers to the core of personality, which is made up of various

constituents that emerge into a coherent and enduring configuration during the interplay of inherited and environmental factors with the child's experience of its earliest selfobjects ... As a unit that endures over time, [the self] develops in the lawful gradual manner of psychological structures. Among its core attributes, the self is the center of initiative, recipient of impressions, and repository of that individual's particular constellation of nuclear ambitions, ideals, talents and skills. These motivate and permit it to function as a self-propelling, self-directed and self-sustaining unit, which provides a central purpose to the personality and gives a sense of meaning to the person's life. The patterns of ambitions, skills, and goals, the tension between them, the program of action they create, and the resultant activities that shape the individual's life are all experienced as continuous in space and time and give the person a sense of selfhood as an independent center of initiative and independent center of impressions. (Wolf, 1988, p. 182)

Selfobject is described as meaning

...neither self nor object, but the *subjective* aspect of a self-sustaining function performed by a relationship of self to objects who by their presence or activity evoke and maintain the self and the experience of selfhood. As such, the selfobject relationship refers to an intrapsychic experience and does not describe the interpersonal

relationship between the self and other objects (Wolf, 1988, p.184)

The diagnostic criteria for BPD include dissociative symptoms as a specific criterion [see DSM-IV Definition, #9]. Dissociation is a defense mechanism in that it is employed to protect the self structure from trauma-induced vulnerability. "Structure" in the psychological sense means "pattern based upon repetition". The self structure results from consistent self-object experiences. When an individual experiences overwhelming situations of high emotional impact and at odds with his or her previous self-object meanings then the self structure may be "broken" either temporarily or permanently (Langley, 1994). It is this "breaking" or damage to the self structure and the resultant use of dissociation or splitting that Langley highlights as the link between BPD and PTSD.

Briere (1989) also rejects the psychoanalytic contention that BPD is a disorder due to inadequate or dysfunctional maternal nurturance within the first few years of life. Through his clinical practice and research Briere (1989) has concluded that a history of childhood sexual abuse "may predispose some individuals to behavior that satisfies borderline diagnostic criteria" (p. 36). In a later book Briere (1992) expands on this connection between childhood abuse and a diagnosis of BPD by stating that it is likely that the behaviors associated with BPD are chronic reactions and accommodations related to early childhood abuse including psychological, physical and sexual abuse.

Herman (1992) found that 81% of women diagnosed with BPD had histories of severe childhood trauma. She cites a number of studies that confirm a relationship between symptoms of borderline personality disorder and a history of childhood trauma (Hermans, 1992). Waites (1993) also finds a direct relationship between childhood trauma and a later diagnosis of BPD. She states that “substance abuse, family violence, and social barriers to female individuation and independence also probably contribute to the kinds of pathology diagnosed as borderline” (p. 17).

### Splitting

A phenomenon of specific interest to the research study is that of “splitting”. This next section will provide definitions of key concepts, and an exploration of what is meant by the term splitting, and how it occurs.

#### Definitions of dissociative disorders, splitting and structure

Central to the difficulties experienced by those individuals diagnosed with BPD is the concept of splitting. Splitting may be understood to be a type of dissociation (Grotstein, 1981). The DSM-IV describes the essential feature of the dissociative disorders as a “disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment. The disturbance may be sudden or gradual, transient or chronic” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 477).

According to Langley (1994), the term dissociation and the term

splitting have differing intellectual histories. However, they are similar in their applied clinical meaning.

### Object relations theory and splitting

Object Relations (OR) developed in the 1960s as a post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory and therapy model. A significant difference between previous psychoanalytic theories and OR was the inclusion of psychological and social psychological forces in understanding human behavior. In the late 1960s and early 1970s OR theory was responsible for defining the development and describing the behavior of the borderline personality and thereby removing the nondescript meaning of the term borderline from being neither a neurosis nor a psychosis (Langley, 1994).

Langley (1994) states that in 1967, Kernberg, a psychoanalyst, identified “splitting” as a central process in the development of a borderline personality organization. Splitting was defined as “a certain lack of integration of the ego” (Langley, 1994, p. 97). The term splitting had been discussed as early as 1950 by the British School of Object Relations, describing it as a personality defense mechanism, but it was not recognized in the United States as clinically significant until Kernberg’s work (Langley, 1994).

### How splitting occurs

Beginning with the infant, two states may be assumed to be experienced, that is, the “feel good” state and the “feel bad” state. At this

time the infant is “fused” with the primary caregiver in the sense that the infant is not aware that the caregiver is separate from his or her self, although the infant will associate “feel good/feel bad” states with what the caregiver/infant does. This dichotomous awareness can be called “regulatory splitting” and it is an essential element of healthy self development. It is during this so-called “symbiotic phase” that the formation of identity develops; satisfying experiences are the beginnings of the positive self-identity and frustrating experiences serve as the initial traces of the negative self-identity. Initially the two part self-identities (satisfying and frustrating) are separate, with integration occurring by age six or seven. This unified self-identity is an example of what object relations theory refers to as “object constancy” (Masterson, 1978).

When the frustrating experiences are more prevalent than the satisfying ones the infant is thought to develop a “false self” in order to please or placate the caretaker, thereby gaining the infant more satisfying symbiotic experiences. According to OR theory it is during the development phase of separation-individuation (18-48 months) that the self-functions originate that are absent or lacking in adults with BPD, e.g., boundaries, autonomy (Masterson, 1978).

Simply put, it is the consistency and continuity of positive early experiences that enable an individual to develop as an integrated, independent self. Conversely, “experiences that are too intense or too

unintelligible, that are too at variance with the individual's experience base, or that occur too inconsistently, can fragment or split the self"

(Langley, 1994, p. 38).

An important concept in understanding the structure of self is the "interpenetration" of opposites. Beginning with the "feel good/feel bad states" of infancy, psychological experience tends to be a mixture of opposite qualities, e.g., most experiences include both frustrating and satisfying dimensions. When opposite qualities are interpenetrated an integrated self is structured which allows for at least two self functions to develop. According to Langley (1994) these are: "First, the self can provide its own check and balance function as a way to ward off extreme or "all-or-none" reactions. Second, the self can modulate its own responses so that a more selective response or meaning has a chance to occur" (p. 39). When interpenetration of opposites does not occur within a self then that self is split, leading to impulsive behaviors, either-or thinking, and distorted meaning-making.

A dynamic tension results from the interpenetration or integration of opposites that provides a cohesion and stability to the self. Individuals diagnosed with BPD are limited in their ability to integrate the oppositional aspects of experiences and therefore they tend to have a distorted and "flat" perception of themselves and future possibilities (Langley, 1994).

### Regulatory splitting and self-defense splitting

It may easily be argued that splitting is an integral function in our processing of psychological events, therefore it is necessary to distinguish between regulatory (helpful) splitting and the type of splitting that can occur in individuals with BPD - self-defense splitting (Langley, 1994).

Regulatory splitting allows us to order information and form categories that are mutually exclusive, Aristotelian logic operates in this manner. When we sequence psychological events and prioritize categories in order not be to overwhelmed we are practicing regulatory splitting. Making choices and responding to one's own preferences in an orderly manner are also products of regulatory splitting. Being able to distinguish internal events such as feelings, thoughts, beliefs and to distinguish these from others' feelings, thoughts, beliefs etc., leads to another outcome of regulatory splitting that is the ability to maintain a clear sense of self while relating interpersonally (Langley, 1994).

Self-defense splitting involves the ordering of psychological events contingent on the avoidance of painful realizations or awarenesses. This distorting splitting leads to idiosyncratic beliefs and meanings about self, others, and relationships. Chaos ensues from self-defense splitting since prioritizing, choicemaking, and preferencing are all based on the individuals' need to maintain an illusory understanding of self and others. Isolation, and further effort are required in order to protect the self from

acknowledging the distorted view (Langley, 1994).

It is apparent that individuals who depend on self-defense splitting will experience a great deal of difficulty in their day-to-day lives and indeed if we turn to the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for BPD each criteria may be understood to have splitting as its driving force.

### A Description of the Problematic Life of Individuals with Borderline Behaviors

While it has been acknowledged that some women are diagnosed with BPD not because of their own sense of dissatisfaction with the quality of their lives, but because of the attitudes of a culture that finds their impulsive and demanding behaviors unacceptable, there are many individuals diagnosed with BPD who are in great distress and who want an improved quality of life. These individuals share common difficulties in achieving stable employment, lasting relationships, and an integrated sense of self.

The behaviors that are common to individuals who meet the diagnostic criteria of BPD stem largely from an impaired, incomplete, shifting sense of self. The experience of BPD is to feel empty and split. The DSM-IV (1994) describes the identity disturbances of BPD as “sudden and dramatic shifts in self-image, characterized by shifting goals, values, and vocational aspirations” (p. 651). Sudden changes in types of friends, sexual identity, opinions and plans are common. Individuals may perceive events (internal

and external), people, and relationships, in terms of “either-or”, meaning that they do not maintain a sense of the “big picture” and therefore believe in the moment that what is perceived is all there is. The individual who experiences this kind of split, “either-or” understanding of relationships will have difficulties managing conflict in relationship. For example, she might believe that an argument with a friend is an indictment of her whole self rather than simply a difference of opinion. Compounding the problems with integrating conflict as a functional aspect of relationships, is the added difficulty she has in feeling close to others. Due to her lack of an integrated identity and a poor sense of boundaries she will tend to feel either engulfed or abandoned by others.

The impulsivity, addictive tendencies, emotional reactivity and lability, and shifting career and personal aspirations, that are hallmarks of individuals diagnosed with BPD arise from a profound inability to maintain a stable sense of identity. These experiences of lack of self tend to occur when the individual is feeling unsupported and without a connection to a meaningful relationship. The loss of external structure that occurs when a relationship ends can precipitate profound changes in self-image. Persons with BPD “are very sensitive to environmental circumstances” (American Psychiatric Association, p. 650).

Cohen & Gara (1992) assert that the self-reference of those diagnosed with BPD consists of opposed clusters of self, rather than the more usual

*me* and *not-me* contrasts. The individual wards off the onset of a psychosis by enacting the opposing self. This dichotomous self-structure limits the ability of the individual diagnosed with BPD to remain in positive self states for any length of time.

Given the problematic self-structure and subsequent maladaptive coping mechanisms of individuals meeting diagnostic criteria for borderline personality disorder it is evident that integrated self-relations are a necessary aspect of psychological well-being.

The following studies investigate various aspects of the etiology and treatment of borderline personality disorder.

### Current Research

Recent research (Najavits & Gunderson, 1995) indicates that there is a tendency for erratic improvement over time with individuals diagnosed with BPD. The study followed 37 women (aged 17-35 yrs) for a three-year period and found significant improvements in several areas and no significant deterioration. The DSM-IV (1994) also reports a tendency toward improvement over time: “during their 30's and 40's, the majority of individuals with this disorder attain greater stability in their relationships and vocational functioning” (p. 653).

A number of current studies focus on the etiology of borderline personality disorder, such as Patrick, Hobson, Castle and Howard's (1994) examination of the association between troubled interpersonal

relationships and particular kinds of self-structuring. They found a relationship between style of interpersonal relationship and mothering experience, e.g., low maternal care, high maternal overprotection. A study by Torgersen (1994) found a slight genetic influence in the development of borderline personality disorder. The DSM-IV (1994) reports a familial pattern in that a diagnosis of BPD is five times more common among first-degree biological relatives of those with the disorder than in the general population.

Other recent research studies range from an examination of self-structure and self-states in borderline personality disorder (Cohen & Gara, 1992; Ryle & Marlowe, 1995) to reviews on the efficacy of drug treatment and the surrounding issues involved in determining efficacy (Soloff, 1994; Rosenberg, 1994).

Parnas (1994) argues that research of “borderline conditions” has been severely limited due to an exaggerated emphasis on reliability and not enough concern paid to validity issues. He suggests that methodological shortcomings could be overcome by the inclusion of phenomenological observation, prototypical approaches, and insights from studying “normal” populations.

### Theories on the Nature and Character of the Self

Theories of the self may be broadly divided between those that support the Western concept of a bounded, independent, unitary self (Kohut, 1977;

Mahler, 1968) and the relatively recent focus on self as multiple, shifting, and discursively constructed (Gergen, 1991; White & Epsom; 1990). A range of theoretical postulations concerning the nature of self-relations is briefly described in the following section. The review of the literature will concentrate on the more recent concepts of self.

The manner in which self-reference can profoundly affect our future course is explored by Markus and Nurius (1986). They examine the notion of possible selves (cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats for the future and of the past), their effect on self-concept, and the link between self-concept and motivation.

Cultural differences are also identified as factors that affect self-relations by Markus and Kitayama (1991). They propose that Asian cultures foster an interdependent notion of the self, whereas Western cultures embrace an independent notion of the self. Therefore, differing cultural construals of the self and of others, will influence, and possibly determine, the nature of individual experience.

In a discussion focusing on intrapersonal positioning, that is, “the process by which persons position themselves privately in internal discourse” (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995, p. 388), the authors argue that culture defines the boundaries of the self. They propose that the “dividing line between the self and the social and/or natural environment is not definite and may be drawn at different places, varying with contexts and

cultures” (p. 397).

Another cross-cultural perspective comes from Ewing (1990) who maintains that in all cultures people can be observed to project multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly with or without the person's awareness.

An interesting accounting for the notion of holding multiple “I” positions comes from Heshusius (1994). She notes an element of fear in the literature on managing one’s subjectivity, and that there is anxiety about merging, about maintaining distance, and anxiety about the necessity of rigorously accounting for one’s subjectivity. Heshusius suggests that:

as a consequence of such anxiety, we create the idea of distinctly separate “I’s” within one person: the “I” that is doing the restraining, and the “I’s” that need the restraining. But are they separable in the first place? Or is the separation an illusion, created by our psychological need to be in control of something - if not our “objectivity” then our “subjectivity? (p. 19)

Sampson (1985) turns to nonequilibrium physics to explore his contention of a revised ideal of “...personhood as a decentralized, nonequilibrium structure, a pantheon of selves within a single body ...” (p. 1210). He proposes that the Western reliance on the concept of a unitary self may limit our understanding, our growth, and may be destructive in terms of our evolution.

Another use of the physical sciences in hypothesizing about the nature of the self is presented by Schwalbe (1991), who strives to capture an understanding of the self as a “dynamic whole” or “nonlinear dynamical system” (p. 269). He applies the concept of autogenesis, the process of self-organizing in the physical world, to the development of self.

Hermans, Rijks, and Kempen (1993) designed research methodology to support the theory that “there is no single ‘I’ as an agent of self-organization but several, relatively independent ‘I’ positions that complement and contradict each other in dialogical relationships” (p. 207). Hermans (1992) adopts a constructionist perspective on self that he terms “dialogical”. His methodology relies on using narrative as a means to understand human experience.

A study that examines the manner in which individuals maintain multiple, role-specific, self-conceptions as well as a consistent sense of self was conducted by Roberts and Donahue (1994). They concluded that “people see their self-concepts both differently and consistently across social roles” (p. 214).

Victor De Munck (1992) also developed a research design to study self. He uses this study to support his contention that there is no integrated, single self but only a self symbol that gives the illusion of a unified, coherent self.

Johnson (1991) suggests that descriptions of the experience of

pregnancy challenge assumptions regarding the self's boundedness, singularity, and integration. Johnson proposes that the self is better characterized by non-integration and decentred agency. The experience of pregnancy entails a loosening of boundaries, both physical and psychic as a woman's shape inexorably changes and she struggles to do the psychic work necessary to accommodate having an internal, temporary, guest.

A theme that emerged from my research on the experience of an alteration in psychology during pregnancy (Snell, 1992) is the notion that changes in self-relations might occur during pregnancy. The following is quoted from my Master's thesis (Snell, 1992):

As well as being responsible for forming and birthing a new being, a pregnant woman, particularly with a first pregnancy, needs to create a self who has another being growing inside her, a self who is now affecting someone else with everything she ingests and possibly with every thought, a self whose status in society changes abruptly and dramatically, a self who will give birth and parent this new being. From the first knowledge that conception has taken place, a pregnant woman must incorporate into her self concept many new roles that may be in direct conflict with her nonpregnant self. It could be said that a pregnant woman creates and gives birth to a new part of herself as well as giving birth to a baby. (p. 73)

The lived experience of being a self is contrasted with theoretical

conceptions of self by Glass (1993), the author of *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World*. He captures the profound disease experienced by those individuals who do not enjoy a stable subjectivity and contrasts that pain with the postmodernists' idealization of multiplicity or fragmentation of self. According to Glass (1993), the deconstructive practices of postmodernism, which advocates the reduction of "self" to a Foucaultian concept that "there is no inner and outer self, merely practices and ideologies that constitute the self as a consciousness in language" (p. xi) represent a gulf between theory and lived experience.

In his analysis of French theorists, philosophers, and psychoanalytic feminists (he believes postmodernism to be "more complex" than what has been adapted to the American context) Glass (1993) argues against the postmodernist theory of self. He notes that the feminist theorists "often depart from those of the postmodernists, especially from those concerning the status of the self, the nature and construction of gender and identity, the presence of suffering, and the place of healing" (p. xiii).

He compares Kristeva's, a practising psychoanalyst, support of the necessity of a bounded and gendered self, to the convictions of postmodernists such as Derrida, Lyotard, and Baudrillard who "would leave the self without identity" (p. 19). Glass contends that the postmodernistic assertion that "the self is simply a reflection of reality, or metareality or hyperreality, therefore consciousness, if it chooses, is free to

deconstruct those realities and assume or internalize an infinite variety of identities” (p. 25), is callously simplistic in its blindness to human suffering.

Glass (1993) asserts that postmodernists “mistakenly confuse what a core self ‘is’ with the lack of freedom to reject the past, convention, normality, and so on” (p.126). He contends that a stable subjectivity is necessary in order to indulge in the deconstruction of identity.

### Summary

A review of the literature has been provided concerning (a) borderline personality disorder, and within that area the psychological phenomenon of splitting, and; (b) current theories of the self, have been described.

The principal implications from the review of literature on borderline personality disorder are (a) the definitions and descriptions of influences on the development and experience of self-structure provide working definitions and constructs for this study on self-relations; (b) the need for compassionate understanding and treatment for individuals diagnosed with BPD emerges from this review and underscores the necessity of studying self-relations; and (c) the disordered lives of individuals meeting diagnostic criteria for BPD serve as an extreme example of what likely occurs with less intensity or frequency in the lives of all individuals (Kroll, 1993), and therefore increases our understanding of the dynamics of self-relations in general.

The literature review concerning current theories of the self presents the disparate range of approaches in this developing field. Self-relations, therefore, is yet another construction that attempts to capture the experience of being a self. One important aspect of this study on self-relations is the intended purpose to develop insight and treatment approaches that will be helpful to individuals struggling with problems related to self-relations.

The literature review provides a knowledge base from which this study can be understood. Having provided the reader with a review of some of the literature pertinent to this study, the researcher's methodological stance will now be explicated.

## Methodological Considerations

### Research Context

As any mental health practitioner knows, the elegant theories of the pedagogical world tend to fray quickly once applied in the “trenches”. A theoretical model of therapeutic practice, e.g., how psychological change occurs, should embody our knowledge and assumptions and guide our interventions. The same holds true for practicing research, we need to be systematic in our approach and evaluation and, as with counselling, we need to balance our model with a flexible response to the lived reality we encounter.

The theoretical considerations that determined the methodology for this study are inextricably linked with the theoretical considerations that govern my work as a counsellor. As a therapist and as a researcher, I assume that there are multiple realities, and that it is necessary to pay strict attention to what my clients and participants say in order to capture their intended meaning. Such an effort is informed by the knowledge that in a dialogical relationship meaning is co-constructed and therefore never fully embodies one individual’s perspective alone.

In support of the contention that there is “no objective reality awaiting discovery” (p. 241), Rennie and Toukmanian (1992) claim that “reality is the co-constructed product of the interaction between persons in whatever social contexts they find themselves. Hence the subjectivity of the person

serving as the object of inquiry and the subjectivity of the researcher are intertwined (p. 241).

Not only is meaning co-constructed, the individual is constantly evolving in a process of becoming (Mahoney, 1991) and thereby meaning-making evolves as well. Nor is the individual separate from her or his culture in the meaning-making process (Bruner, 1990).

If meaning is a temporal co-construction between individuals whose very selves are in flux, then what point is there in attempting to “know” anything? This question introduces another aspect of the theoretical underpinnings of this research study.

The purpose of this study was to gain descriptions of four therapists’ self-relations and further, to contribute to current treatment approaches concerning individuals who experience difficulties with self-integration. Implicit in this purpose is the assumption that an individual’s self-relations are stable enough and persistent enough to enable the gathering of descriptions over a period of time. Is this not inconsistent with the aforementioned “shifting reality” perception of meaning? The answer to this question resides in a therapeutic intervention that I employ as a counsellor.

It is my contention that self-relations arise from a relatively enduring self-structure [see discussion of BPD for development of self-structure], therefore the participants’ describe internal processes that remain

comparatively similar over time. The intervention I employ as a therapist involves encouraging an individual to “hold” two apparently opposing concepts simultaneously and to allow both to be “true”; one belief does not have to negate the other. Although two beliefs may be contradictory it is possible to simply allow that each view has merit and that it is not necessary to resolve or blend contradiction.

Here, on the one hand there is the belief that meaning is co-constituted between individuals who are both in flux, and on the other hand there is the assertion that individuals apprehend their worlds from an established framework. This construction of “holding” apparently opposing belief systems is intended to release individuals from the necessity of taking an “either-or” position, and it is an integral part of my stance as a researcher and as a therapist.

The tendency to create dichotomies, either/or constructions of experience has a long history in the evolution of human consciousness. In the sixth century BC, the word *psyche* changed in meaning from “life” to “soul” creating a new meaning for its antonym, *soma*, which had meant corpse, or deadness, and now meant body. The word, *nous*, perhaps the first word used to connote a subjective, conscious mind, was blended with the new meaning for *psyche* and thus the beginning of the perceived dualism of conscious mind and body (Jaynes, 1976).

Descartes is credited with promoting the concept of a mind-body split.

What is known today as a Cartesian duality describes the notion that human beings are composed of two distinct systems, one mental and one material (Harré & Gillet, 1994). This conceptualization is embraced by the positivist assertion that “reality” exists independent of our perceptions of it, and that human behavior may be predicted and controlled through quantifiable scientific methods (Kvale, 1996; Denzin, 1992).

Today, the physical sciences have developed beyond a dualistic understanding of our world. The logic of positivistic reality is challenged in quantum physics by Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, “which asserts that the position and momentum of an electron cannot *both* be determined, because the action of the observer in making either measurement inevitably alters the other (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 28). This discovery “implies that, at the most elemental level, the universe is an indivisible whole” (Morse, 1995, p. 15).

The physicist, Niels Bohr, supported such a notion through the development of the principle of complementarity, which addresses the paradox that light may appear to be both wavelike and particlelike in character (Overton, 1994). Bohr accepted that both views of light’s character were correct, accordingly, “either perspective could be taken for purposes of a particular line of inquiry” (Overton, 1994, p. 4). Such discoveries lend validity to the concept that the act of perceiving has an effect on what is being perceived, therefore reality does not exist

independent from our perceptions.

Another way perception interfaces with what is being perceived is demonstrated by Kvale (1996) in his description of the Danish psychologist Rubin's ambiguous drawing that can be seen alternatively as two faces or a vase. Kvale (1996) argues that

we can focus on the two faces of the ambiguous figure, see them as the interviewer and the interviewee, and conceive of the interview as the interaction between the two persons. Or we can focus on the vase between the two faces, see it as containing the knowledge constructed *inter the views* of the interviewer and the interviewee. There is an alternation between the knowers and the known, between the constructors of knowledge and the knowledge constructed. (p. 15)

In this case the perceiver shifts his or her attention in order to see either perspective contained in the drawing. Another approach to the role of perception in the apprehension of reality is provided by Mahoney (1991) in his description of the "Necker cube" (p. 105). The drawing of this cube allows for the position of the cube to be seen from two perspectives without any actual changes occurring to the drawing. Mahoney (1991) claims that the cube illustrates that "a change in perspective does not always presume or entail a change in physical stimulus (or situation)" and that it demonstrates "the impossibility of 'seeing' more than one perspective at a time", and implies "the active involvement of the perceiver in perceptual

processes” (p. 105).

The aforementioned examples of the various relationships between perception and what is being perceived confirm my intuitive promotion of a stance that tolerates and embraces multiple realities. I have found it liberating, for myself and for my clients, to move beyond either-or conceptions. “Truths” can change according to the interactions between perceivers and perceptions, and paradoxical realities can co-exist without a resolution.

The specific manner in which the co-constitution of “reality” manifests within this research study is to be found in the section detailing the prevalent themes emerging from the analysis. Before presenting these themes, one last component of the framework of this study will be explicated, that is, an accounting of the researcher’s assumptions, e.g., concerning borderline personality disorder, self-relations and other matters pertinent to the study.

#### Assumptions Regarding Borderline Personality Disorder

Before describing my assumptions concerning borderline personality disorder, a short discussion of my assumptions regarding the use of psychiatric diagnoses will be presented. The use of a label is a temporary necessity that is best described by the expression, “The map is not the territory”. Individuals, as complex as we are, do not fall into neat categories. However, the cluster of behaviors that constitute the diagnosis

of borderline personality disorder is clinically recognizable to me. I work with individuals who match such criteria (and not that of other disorders) quite closely.

Again, it is not a question of “either-or” (labels are useless versus labels are all encompassing), but a question of, “To what extent am I prepared to accept what is implied when labelling individuals?” The implications include (a) treatment issues involving the psychiatric reliance on pharmacology, (b) the narrowing of conceptions of “normal” behavior, and (c) a restriction of the ability to see the whole person in their context.

I believe that there is a great deal of latitude in what may be termed “functional”. The criterion I rely on is that the client wants to change some aspect of his or her life, e.g., their coping strategies. To be of assistance it is generally useful for the counsellor to gain knowledge about some developmental influences experienced by the client. I believe that childhood trauma can affect self-relations enough to create problems for that individual.

The lack of a core conception of self creates a sense of distress that as health providers we need to address in a nonjudgmental and helpful manner. Briere (1989), a psychologist working with trauma survivors, traces the results of childhood trauma to the lack of a stable point of reference for the adolescent and adult. This disturbance of self is heard in the words of an angry and frustrated male adolescent during a juvenile

hall interview, “Don’t you understand? There’s nobody inside here to hear what you say. I’m just empty. I just do what happens” (p. 47).

Simply put then, I understand that (a) individuals have painful events in their lives and if it is early enough, or constant enough, or if there are not appropriate supports in place, then some long lasting effects come into place, e.g., splitting; (b) such effects can be understood and compensated for; (c) one manner in which change can occur is by working with a therapist, and; (d) difference is not necessarily a problem, problems are defined by the individual.

#### An Accounting of Self-Relations

This study was designed to answer the question, “How do four therapists describe their self-relations?” The purpose of the study was to gain in-depth descriptions of the participants’ self-relations and their therapeutic approaches with clients who are dissociative, as evidenced in borderline personality disorder [BPD]. A further purpose of the study entailed the provision of the opportunity to develop new theoretical perspectives on self-integration. Swhratz and Walker (1995) comment on the necessity of theory:

One reason we need theory is to help get some grip on complexity, to narrow the problem, to develop parallels with other situations that might seem different but provide the basis for new ways of looking at things. Only theory can give us access to unexpected questions and

ways of changing situations from within. (p. 107)

My construct of self-relations borrows from object relations theory [see Literature Review] and includes some constructivist theory, specifically that of Guidano (1991, 1995) and Mahoney (1991). The OR theory posits that a dynamic tension results from the interpenetration or integration of opposites that provides a cohesion and stability to the self. When this interpenetration cannot occur, the self develops but the necessary comparison between “good” and “not-good” does not occur, and it is this internal joining of positive and negative possibilities that allows for ongoing integration and communication between various aspects of the self. When a developing individual has not had the opportunity to experience the “sometimes-good/sometimes-bad” nature of themselves and their caretakers, it is theorized that a “false self” is created, thereby establishing a problematic self-structure.

Self-structure, a psychological term, has been defined previously [see Literature Review] as a “pattern based on repetition” (Langley, 1994), the pattern includes the individual’s sense of self in relation to self and in relation to others.

The organizational role that attachment plays in the development of self-perception is considered by Guidano, a critical constructivist, to involve “regularities drawn from caregivers’ behaviors and affective messages” (1995, p. 97). He maintains that “attachment is central to the

stable differentiation of a sense of self” (1995, p. 99). The primacy of consistent parenting as a factor in the development of a flexible and functional self-structure is central to my understanding of self-relations.

Mahoney (1991) describes the self as “a complex and dynamic metaphor for the unique and spontaneous self-organizing processes that *are* each person ...” (p. 224). He holds that deeply ingrained patterns of activity constitute the “who” and “how” of each individual (Mahoney, 1991).

My understanding of self-relations, and of the far more complex question of what comprises the self, includes agreement with Lerner (1996) who proposes that developmental variables such as “biological, psychological, and social and physical contextual levels” (p. 784) are “dynamically interactive” (p. 785).

#### Other Assumptions Guiding the Research

It is evident to me that gender, race, and economic status, all very much affect and determine what the lived reality will be for an individual. We cannot separate ourselves from our context. Blau (1981) advocates that the role of values in scholarship (she speaks to feminist scholarship in particular) should be a balance between benefiting from the manner in which our values provide us insights (e.g., in selecting interesting questions) and in guarding against our values distorting the findings of our research.

A further value that dominates this research study is the necessity of maintaining a dialogical relationship between researcher and participant that is characterized by trust, respect, rapport, and mutual interest in the phenomenon (Rubin, 1995). As previously stated, my orientation to this study is heavily influenced by my occupation as a counsellor and the ethics and values that arise from this occupation. Osborne (1990) states that “the relationship between researcher and co-researcher parallels the relationship between counsellor and client” (p. 88).

Having provided the essential framework for this study in the past sections detailing the impetus, question, theoretical background, and methodological implications of the research, a description of the actual research process follows.

## Gathering Data

### Selection of Participants

Participants were selected through the process of “purposeful sampling”. Patton (1990) explains that, “The purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 169). This method of participant selection is consistent with the research question, that is, to gain descriptions of the self-relations of therapists who work with clients meeting diagnostic criteria for borderline personality disorder. As previously stated, it is my assumption that such therapists have developed, to varying degrees, theories around self-relations, and therefore it is likely that they would be thoughtful and articulate concerning the topic of interest. Accordingly, participants were selected who “have experienced and can illuminate the phenomenon” (Osborne, 1990, p. 82).

Letters were sent to several therapists in the Victoria area [see Appendix B]. Since I work as a therapist in this community, identifying potential participants was not difficult. Interested participants were invited to telephone me with any questions and to set up a convenient time for the first interview. Four participants were made available through this process.

### Introducing the Participants

Each participant was asked for a few comments to be included with the following demographic information.

Amber is a 43-year-old therapist practicing in Victoria. She has been in the helping professions for many years and a counsellor for the last “five or six years”. She is a mother, lives with a male partner, and comes from a white, middle-class background; it was within this family that she experienced traumatic childhood abuse.

She is concerned that the level of honesty she contributed to this study exposes her to judgements of incompetence. She does not question that her anonymity will be protected. Rather, she is understandably attached to “Amber” being perceived by the reader as a “competent therapist and person”. I am very grateful for her contribution to this study and believe she is all the more competent as a therapist and person because of her ability to reveal herself to herself and to us.

Abbott is a 39-year-old therapist practicing in Victoria who has been a therapist for “probably 15 years”. He is a father and lives with a female partner; he comes from a troubled, white, lower class background.

He believes that “being human we all have our paths that we travel, this is just me. Making meaning of our life is just a sacred process and we all have different ways, it’s really important that there isn’t a wrong or

right way.” This participant’s genuine sense of caring shone throughout our interviews and I feel fortunate to have such a research participant.

May is a 46-year-old therapist practicing in Victoria; she has “almost 20 years of clinical experience”. She is a stepmother, lives with a male partner, was born outside Canada, and comes from a white, middle-class family.

She would like the reader to know that her spiritual practice (Buddhism) “is a very important part of my life”; she also would like the reader to understand that “the importance of my process in personal growth, which includes a regular program of working out” is interwoven with her spiritual practice. I greatly appreciate how hard she worked in the interviews to “find the right words”.

Peeta is a 46-year-old therapist practicing in Victoria; she has been a therapist for “about 20 years”. She lives with a male friend, and comes from a white, middle-class background; it was within this family that she experienced traumatic childhood abuse.

Peeta considered her participation in this study to be a “valuable experience” and “empowering”. She discovered, through the process of describing her self-relations, that she has a “stronger sense of self” than she realized. Peeta’s years of personal work and her willingness to discuss her journey greatly inform this study. I very much appreciate her

participation.

### Interview Procedures

The nine interviews (two interviews each for three participants, and a third for one participant) took place in my participants' offices or homes, and twice in my home. The choice of location was decided by the participant.

Before beginning each interview a letter of consent was signed by the participant [see Appendix C] and the time commitment involved was discussed. Participants were verbally encouraged to express any difficulties related to the interview process, and my appreciation of their participation was extended at this time.

The interviews were audiotaped, and were approximately one hour and a half hours in length.

### Interview Questions

Rather than following a strict format of questions identical for each participant, I developed a general interview guide. Patton (1990) describes the general interview guide approach as follows:

[it] involves outlining a set of issues that are to be explored with each respondent before interviewing begins. The issues in the outline need not be taken in any particular order and the actual wording of questions to elicit responses about those issues is not determined in

advance. The interview guide simply serves as a basic checklist during the interview to make sure that all relevant topics are covered. The interview guide presumes that there is common information that should be obtained from each person interviewed, but no set of standardized questions is written in advance. The interviewer is thus required to adapt both the wording and the sequence of questions to specific respondents in the context of the actual interview. (p. 280)

The topics covered with each participant included (a) participant's experience of self-relations, which encompassed descriptive language, e.g., metaphors, self-talk (use of "I", "you", etc.), shifting "I" according to context, having a sense of roles/parts/selves; (b) participant's perception of clients' dissociative behaviour; (c) therapeutic interventions utilized with these clients, and; (d) relationship of personal and professional.

As the introductory letter had explained, I wanted to hear about the participant's self-organization, their internal experience of being an "I" in their various roles, and levels of awareness and preferences around that. Everyone was asked about their internal language (referring to self as "I", "you", "we") and when this language was used, e.g., critic voice saying "you". Other than asking about such internal language, and the experience of "being of two minds", the interviews were mainly concerned with encouraging the participants to expand and clarify their own statements

about what it is like in their internal world. They all spontaneously volunteered information about their most essential experience, e.g., authentic self, core self, soul.

I began each interview with the caution that I would be using different words in reference to the same concept in order not to limit the participant's language and to avoid creating any "template" to compare their experience to. As soon as the participant described their inner experience a certain way then I would use their language, e.g., one participant preferred the term "parts", another did not find that term appropriate, she preferred "aspects".

Feedback was sought after the first interview, concerning my style and the participants level of comfort and any suggestions for improvement on my part. All of the participants commented that the process was very interesting and had no suggestions for improvements in my style. A comment such as, "I felt that what I said was very respected" was typical of the feedback I received.

### Overview of the Analysis of the Interviews

I will begin this section with a clarification of my stance as a researcher who is interpreting the meaning of other individuals' words. This will be followed by a brief orientation to the steps undertaken in analysing the data from the interviews and then a detailed accounting of

this process will be provided.

A central aspect of interpreting other individuals' words involves the manner in which meaning is co-constituted [see Methodology section for further discussion]. Dey (1993) suggests that "there is a difference between an open mind and empty head" (p. 63), referring to the necessity when analysing data to use accumulated knowledge rather than dispensing with it. A description of the requirements for conducting inductive data analysis is provided by Morse (1994):

Data analysis is a process that requires astute questioning, a relentless search for answers, active observation, and accurate recall. It is a process of piecing together data, of making the invisible obvious, of recognizing the significant from the insignificant, of linking seemingly unrelated facts logically, of fitting categories one with another, and of attributing consequences to antecedents. It is a process of conjecture and verification, of correction and modification, of suggestion and defence. It is a creative process of organizing data so that the analytic scheme will appear obvious. (p. 25)

The process of this part of the data analysis began with the creation of transcripts generated from the interviews. They were read several times to gain familiarity with the content and to allow for the beginning of intuitive understanding of meaning. Patton (1990) describes this stage as an

*immersion* when the researcher “becomes totally involved in the world of the experience, questioning, meditating, dialoguing, daydreaming, and indwelling” (p. 409).

Meaning units - a segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode, or piece of information (Tesch, 1990) - were delineated. The meaning units were labelled as to topic (not content) and a list of topics was created. The list of topics was then studied and a preliminary organizing system (e.g., flowchart, map) that described the relationship of the topics to each other and to the research question was developed. The organizing system was then refined to include all relevant topics from all the transcripts.

Codes were created from the organizing system and the meaning units were labelled with one or more codes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Rubin, 1995; Tesch, 1990). The coding procedure followed Coffey and Atkinson’s (1996) approach, “coding should be thought of as essentially heuristic, providing ways of interacting with and thinking about the data. Those processes of reflection are more important than the precise procedures and representations that are employed” (p. 30).

The software analysis program, The Ethnograph, allowed for the numbering of each line of the transcripts and attaching of the created codes to the lines. Coded meaning units were then printed out complete

with source information to allow within and between transcript contextualizing.

By studying the decontextualized meaning unit topics and referring to the contextualized content in a back and forth manner, a process of reading, writing, and reflection was undertaken. From this process themes emerged and a descriptive analysis was created (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Kvale, 1996; Rubin, 1995; Tesch, 1990).

#### A Detailed Accounting of the Analysis Process

Once the audiotapes from the first set of interviews were transcribed, I listened to the tapes while following along in the transcripts, noting anything that struck me as particularly significant. During the interviews I had experienced an underlying sense that I was missing some rich material, there seemed to be so many directions I could pursue with almost every comment. The course I chose to follow, what I picked up on and asked for elaboration about, was determined by the sense I had of what might be most informative in terms of detailing the participants' understanding of their self-relations.

While I read the transcripts and listened to the audiotapes I began looking for those places where I had made a choice about what to pursue. This proved unproductive regarding my intended purpose of gaining a clear understanding of what had been missed and what had been

relatively exhausted as a topic. I did however begin to note occurrences I considered significant, such as, particularly insightful comments by a participant, the beginning traces of common themes appearing, and places in the interview where I changed the direction of the flow of communication in what was an abrupt manner.

Overall, listening to the tapes and reading the transcripts failed to provide a clear sense of each interview as a whole. It was at this time that I decided to create a visual reconstruction of the interviews by tracking my questions and the participants' answers and noting where a thread was followed and where it was dropped. Taping blank pages of paper end to end allowed for the creation of a linear representation of questions and answers. I condensed sections of speech by developing a short descriptor and I used arrows to indicate flows between my questions and the answers.

Once such a map of the interview was complete, it became apparent that each participant consistently referred to the same personal themes throughout his or her interview. The participants had tended to focus on three to four subject areas and these themes were tracked through the interview by highlighting them in different colours. Places in the interview where I had asked a question that resulted in a marked change in the course of the interview were also colour coded, and unexplored comments

that in retrospect sounded potentially fruitful were highlighted.

Each interview was condensed in this manner; the maps were approximately 4-5 feet in length of pages taped end to end. This method gave me a sense of the overall interview and allowed me to pinpoint areas to address in the re-interviews. It also allowed for a clearer understanding of what guided my questions and when I was on track and when I was not.

### Re-interviewing

For the re-interviews I realized I not only wanted to gain a more thorough description of the areas I had noted as promising from the first interview, I also wanted to invite the participants to step back from themselves. I was interested in their thoughts concerning how the manner in which their values and beliefs about who they *should* be might effect their experience of themselves. Consequently, I created the re-interview questions [see Appendix D].

Each re-interview was structured around the map constructed from the first interview. The map was spread out and the participant and I discussed what had been said. I probed for confirmation of my understanding and asked for elaboration where indicated. The participants found the maps interesting and they all commented that they noticed a marked consistency within the first interview that remained stable in the second interview. The re-interview questions were woven into

the discussion.

The final question of the second interview invited overall feedback and impressions about the interviews, any leftover thoughts or feelings, and observations.

### Organizing the data

Once the transcripts from the final interviews were read over while listening to the tapes and noteworthy comments highlighted, all the transcripts were brought together. Meaning units were delineated for all nine transcripts and topic sentences were generated [as discussed in Overview of this section]. A separate page of topic sentences was kept that described my comments and questions during the interviews.

Approximately 600 topic sentences were created and a process of categorizing began by reading over the lists of topics and noting broad categories. A flow chart began to take form and four general areas were described. These are (a) topics about events that took place in the interview, (b) topics regarding personal themes, (c) topics concerning professional issues, and (d) topics describing my comments in the interviews.

The topic sentences of participants' comments were highlighted in three different colours according to the general areas defined and three separate lists were created [see Appendix E for example]. The flow chart

was refined by a process of going over the lists of topic sentences, reading the transcripts, and creating and discarding categories in the flow chart. After a preliminary flow chart was defined the topic sentences were reviewed one by one to find a fit for each in the flow chart. This process refined and further modified the flow chart until all topic sentences fit at least one category [see Appendix F].

Once the flow chart was finalized then the transcripts were coded (codes were created from the categories) according to the 45 categories defined in the flow chart. The transcripts were prepared for coding with the use of a software analysis program, The Ethnograph, by numbering the lines of the transcripts. Coding was accomplished by taking sections of speech that were large enough to retain meaning within the greater context of the interview and yet small enough to contain one topic, and marking off the numbered lines included in each section. Appropriate codes (or code) were then written beside the marked section. The transcripts were heavily coded as many levels of meaning were being analysed. Some categories were subsets of a greater category and some meaning units could be understood to belong to several perspectives.

The creation of categories is intended to be a helpful organizing tool and the categories do not have any intrinsic boundaries (Tesch, 1990), therefore the meaning of the categories could change according to the

participant. For example, the code “I question” was generally used to note any comments participants made concerning questions asked. One participant interpreted several of my questions around internal language as about external language (here the use of “you”) and therefore I used the “I question” code to mark when this participant’s comments suggested an interpretation of my queries other than how I intended. I decided that this misunderstanding of my intended meaning was particular to this participant since my questions regarding internal use of “you” language did not cause any misinterpretation with the other participants.

Throughout the analysis procedure, in fact, throughout the preparation of this dissertation, I jotted down hunches, connections, patterns, inconsistencies, differences, similarities, causal relationships, impressions, and theories as they occurred to me. These notes proved invaluable in enriching and expanding the research process. Notes were kept while coding each transcript to track changing subtleties in how I was using each code and to clarify the borders of each code, always being aware of maintaining a balance between keeping the categories “fuzzy” (Tesch, 1990) yet not so much that the category lost interpretive meaning, or conversely narrowing the concept of the category to the extent that it lost general usefulness.

An example of the distinctions I defined to aid in the coding process

follows: the difference between “PR genbel” and “P others” is that while both include any comments about other people, the former covers comments about people in general, and the latter refers to comments about specific people in the participant’s life.

The coding process changed and evolved as I coded each transcript. One noticeable change was through the realization that the coding had been initially too heavy and therefore the “sieve” was too fine resulting in repetitious and multitudinous data. I refined the coding by deciding to code according to what was directly being referred to rather than including inferred categories as well.

One code that proved less definitive than the others was that of “p internal”, which was meant to cover references to knowledge of internal processes. However, the code “p struggle” for references to a central issue each participant had consistently alluded to, and the code “p essent” for experiences of a core self or an essential self, tended to cover the same ground that “p internal” was meant to cover. Fortunately the Ethnograph can adjust the parameters of the coded sections printed out.

Once the coded segments had been defined for the Ethnograph program by entering in the line numbers with their codes, the coded sections were printed out. To compensate for any redundancy in using the code “p internal” the Ethnograph was programmed to print out only those

sections coded with “p internal” that were not also marked with either “p essent” or “p struggle”. In this way the Ethnograph allows for multiple searches that define a combination of codes and/or the exclusion of codes. The Ethnograph also allows for single searches of code words, for example, all sections of text coded “p essent” from each transcript were printed out and put together allowing a comparison between transcripts of any mentioning of an essential self. In this way forty-five codes were printed out from all the transcripts using single or multiple searches.

All coded segments printed out contain information detailing which transcript they are from, where in the transcript the segment is from, and what other codes have been used for that segment. The movement between de-contextualized segments and the whole transcript is essential for a contextual understanding of meaning. To assist in re-contextualizing, a different colour of paper was used for each participant when printing out the extracted coded segments.

The process of analysing the interview data, that is, the reading of the whole transcripts, listening to the audiotapes, comparing coded segments within and between transcripts, allowing intuitive connections to be generated, writing, and reflecting, eventually resulted in the identification of central and specific themes regarding the content of the interviews.

The participants were sent copies of a preliminary analysis of the

interviews and feedback was obtained from them via telephone contact. They concurred with my interpretation of the data, and praised my thoroughness and respectful handling of their comments [see Credibility for further discussion].

## Themes and Reflections

### Overview

The following section will detail the results of the organization and analysis of the data. The participants' words have been extensively quoted to provide the inclusion of more than the researcher's voice in the following description of four counsellors' self-relations. However, it is acknowledged that the participants are heard through the organizing principles of the researcher.

The participants have been quoted verbatim except where citing redundant use of "um, right, you know" etc., serves no purpose in clarifying meaning. Additional information has been provided, such as noting when a participant paused or when their tone of voice altered.

A short description of the themes that emerged from an analysis of the transcripts will preface a presentation of a more detailed accounting. The researcher's reflections follow the elucidation of each theme.

\* Striving to be accountable as an interviewer

The first theme to be discussed is the interviewer's intentions and influences as understood by the interviewer and informed by feedback from the participants.

\* Getting ready

The participants shared an initial difficulty in locating the direction of

the interview concerning their internal experience.

\* Struggling in the interview or Trying to explain how you walk

Grappling to describe that which until now has not been described was another common theme for the participants.

\* Changing through the interview process or “Getting to know myself better”

The process of changing that occurred within the interview and between the interviews is revealed in this theme.

\* The inherent correspondence between the participants’ self-relations and their therapeutic interventions

The similarities between participants descriptions of their self-relations and their descriptions of clients’ self-relations are presented. The use of consistent figurative language when imaging, processing personal issues, or working with clients is analysed. Included in this general theme are particular themes, such as, Having a core struggle.

\* The meaning ascribed to the language of self-relations

The participants each had unique conceptions surrounding words such as, parts, core self, soul. Included in this general theme are specific themes, such as, Experiencing an essential inner component.

\* Positioning feelings in self-relations

Not surprisingly each participant had a unique understanding of the

role and place of their feelings in terms of self-relations.

\* Wanting to be the same on the outside as on the inside

To varying degrees each participant valued and actively worked toward achieving a sense of congruency between internal experience and external behavior.

\* Using “you”

The meaning of “you” in the participants’ internal dialogue varied: it could connote a nurturing voice, a critical voice, or demonstrate a desire to externalize an uncomfortable feeling or attitude.

\* Understanding dissociative processes

Despite apparently sharing an understanding of dissociation concerning a definition, the participants conceptualized the process of dissociation or splitting according to their unique structuring of self-relations.

The purpose of providing the abovementioned short description of the themes is to assist the reader in identifying the interwoven themes as the details of the interviews are revealed. I begin this discussion with myself, the interviewer, since a thorough appreciation of my intentions regarding the research study is integral in ultimately grasping the reciprocal relationship between the studier and the studied.

### Striving to Hear the Participants

The focus for each initial interview was to gain a description of the participants' self-relations: How they orchestrated roles/selves; How they dealt with internal conflict; What was the nature and content of internal dialogues?; What was their experience of being a self or selves? Having had some experience interviewing and being interviewed on this subject matter I was confident that the participants would provide their own momentum. I could simply facilitate the discussion, rather than having to direct and prompt throughout the interview.

After thanking the participant for taking part in the study, I began each interview by inquiring whether she or he had anything on their mind. I did this as a precaution against the introductory letter having stirred up issues that the participant was waiting to debrief. One participant had noticed some reactions to the letter and she took this opportunity to tell me what thoughts and feelings she had noticed arising from contemplating being a participant. The other participants simply noted that they had an interest in the content and process of the interview.

The next step was the gathering of some demographic information, e.g., age, years and areas of practice, personal information (if volunteered), clinical model of practice. In keeping with my therapeutic style as a counsellor I asked open-ended general questions and then followed the

direction of the respondent, therefore I accepted whatever demographic information was forthcoming and did not ask specifically for additional information.

After this initial phase of the interview was completed I inquired whether she or he was prepared to comment about their self-relations. All the participants had difficulty beginning such a discussion. I therefore prompted each participant to recount their reaction to the introductory letter and to review their understanding of the research study. The ensuing discussion was helpful in establishing exactly what the research study was intended to investigate, although it did not always elicit a spontaneous branching into their own processes.

If a participant continued to have difficulty getting started I introduced the notion of “switching”, e.g., what was it like to switch after work from being a therapist to being someone’s friend? At this point in the interview momentum was established and I could follow the lead of the participant into an exploration of their inner world. Once this process was initiated the material I wanted to cover often arose spontaneously and I did not necessarily have to ask for that information specifically. The information that I gathered from each participant included: reaction to letter; experience of shifting roles; being of two minds (resolving internal conflict); internal language (“you”, critic voice); description of

parts/roles/selves; understanding of clients meeting borderline diagnostic criteria; therapeutic interventions, and; relationship of personal and professional.

Throughout the interviews I relied heavily on my skills as a counsellor. After the first interview when I created the interview map my questions and places where it seemed that I had broken into the flow of the conversation were marked and later discussed with the participants in the follow-up interview. I included in the analysis of the transcripts a tracking of my responses and these were categorized and printed out according to an attached code. Understanding my influences on the interview process and content was very beneficial in knowing what were important unsolicited contributions from the participants.

I noticed from the interview maps that when I broke the flow of the discussion it was usually to return to what I considered an uncompleted and interesting explanation of an internal process. Occasionally I broke the flow because I simply could not think of an appropriate response that would continue an exploration of the current topic; at such times I often asked whatever came to mind. One example occurred when Amber spontaneously began speaking of a tree metaphor in describing her self-relations, I was intrigued and excited to hear about it but could not in the moment come up with a neutral kind of response that would examine this

area in more detail. What I asked her then was about the origin of this metaphor, which I consider to be a “break” in our flow. The question did provide very interesting and worthwhile information but it was not in keeping with my general approach of following the participant, even at the time I was dissatisfied with my response.

Another reason I would break the flow was if a topic became exhausted and the conversation did not gracefully pursue a fresh direction, as often happened; I would then purposefully go back to where the conversational path had branched. I also was aware of the time factor; we had agreed on a one and a half hour interview and I needed to finish on time with the information I required. Therefore, another type of break would occur when I prepared a participant to move on to a new area of discussion. A more subtle kind of break in the flow occurred when I attempted to encourage the participant to step away from their direct experience of self-relations and reflect on the “bigger picture” rather than the details of an internal process. There were times as well when I simply missed the mark with my response and the flow temporarily bogged down through my lack of insight.

Creating the interview maps from the first interview allowed me to keep close track of when I introduced my own agenda and when I missed a potentially fruitful comment and I could pursue these in the second

interview. As I went over the maps with the participants in the second interview I could ask each about specific comments I had missed, such as when Peeta found it “weird” to be asked specifically about her parts of self, although she did go on to answer my question. In the first interview I chose to pick up on the content of her response rather than her brief reaction, so being able to go back to that place was very helpful in the second interview and have her tell me about what she meant by “weird”. Her explanation of what she was experiencing then enriched my understanding of her meaning.

Another advantage of the interview maps was that it allowed the participants to follow their thought processes during the second interview; to revisit places they went to in the first interview. The complex and subtle nature of the topic of self-relations means that the material is not necessarily immediately available and therefore being allowed to retrace their thought processes is helpful for the individual. Another advantage of re-interviewing with the map was that it provided a context when I asked for clarification and expansion of comments from the first interview. It also helped to track inconsistencies within the first interview and refine what the participant meant to convey.

Reviewing the map also allowed me to take the opportunity to determine the effect of what I considered clumsy, misdirected responses on

my part during the first interview. The participants apparently did not judge my responses as critically as I did; they assured me they had not particularly noticed occasional ineptness on my part. I could pursue in this second interview the comments the participants had made about their sense of what was being established as their internal process. For example, Peeta in the first interview said a few times that “it wasn’t that black and white”, and these comments got lost in the flow of our conversation. I could get back to them during the re-interview and her explication of what were “gray” areas greatly expanded my understanding of that particular topic.

Believing that respect for my participants’ unique realities was a cornerstone of the research process, being as open as possible to how they described their internal worlds was uppermost in my mind during the interviews and to be very sensitive to their need for privacy and safety (a consideration given the potentially disturbing content of some of our discussion). It was valuable information and confirmation for me when I asked a participant in the second interview about a time early in the first interview when I had not pursued a particular direction due to my sense that she was not ready to divulge such personal material. The participant concurred that at that point she had not been ready.

There were times in the interviews that I probed and pushed for more

details and struggled with the participants in finding words that described their internal process that they were so familiar with yet had so little experience being articulate about. From the introductory letter and throughout the interviews I continued to work on balancing the need to use words to ask my questions and not limit or predefine what the participants said. As soon as possible in the first interview I told each participant that I would be using a variety of words to cover the sense of having selves/roles/ aspects and that the reason I would change what word I used was that I did not want to influence how they spoke of their internal experience or even for that matter frame how they understood their internal experience. Once the participant had provided their own words then I would use those.

When I finished coding the transcripts I noticed that one of my more frequent comments was that "I don't want to put words in your mouth". This was a very delicate balance as I wanted to pursue their own understanding but I had to use words to do so and in so doing I was reluctant to say what I was asking since I wanted to be sure it was what I was sensing behind their words. An example of this occurred when I surmised that Amber was noticing that she was putting words to concepts that had not been named before, and I wanted to ask her about that without saying it. My efforts to have her comment on these new concepts

fell flat and I eventually just asked her if indeed her experience was that she was discussing internal processes in a new way, and she agreed enthusiastically that it was the case.

One of the codes for my responses was called “me careful” and there are many examples of how I would skirt around what I thought might be underlying the content of what was being said, and sometimes the participant would go that much deeper or inward and begin to discuss what I had thought I was hearing. Sometimes the participant could not follow my gentle, roundabout probes and I would have to backtrack and sum up a certain part of the interview enough to invite the participant to comment on what was left unsaid.

There were times that I asked direct questions intended to expand the scope of what we were discussing. One such question was to ask, “How do you know that?” This would often lead to very fruitful discussions. Another question I frequently asked was, “Who feels/thinks that?” which would lead into a clarification of how that person experienced having parts/roles/selves and how they understood where their feelings and thoughts fit in. Most of these kinds of questions arose directly from the content of what was being said and were specific to the topic, this makes it difficult clearly to describe the process of question-asking for growth of understanding. My responses were similar to those I might make as a

therapist when my client is exploring psychic territory. I know at times it was challenging for my participants; however, as therapists who have done their own therapy, they could push themselves into territory that was new to them.

Being “experienced clients” and therapists contributed to the ability of the participants to anticipate my next question at times. Amber, toward the end of the first interview, mentioned something specific about her belief system and then laughed saying, “You’re going to ask me about ...” Abbott backtracking in our discussion tied a current comment with “you know, back to that other question that you just asked me ...”

When I asked May one of my stock questions about her internal processes involved with question-answering, she commented that she “was asking myself that, too.” While expanding on a difficult-to-grasp inner relationship I asked Amber something and she responded, “it’s the same question I was thinking before you asked it.” Referring to my ability to follow our somewhat ethereal conversation May commented that “you’re keeping up with this better than I am ...that’s the therapist part [alluding to herself] also tracking the process as well as the content.”

Having participants who were able to examine themselves and had the confidence and self-knowledge to contest any question or comment on my part that did not match their experience allowed for a sense of equality in

the interview relationship. When I responded with a word that did not fit their experience the participants would disagree with what I had said and then would provide a more accurate description of their meaning. The willingness to explore their inner worlds, their expertise as clients and as therapists, and their degree of self-knowledge, has greatly enriched this research study. They actively participated in their interviews, responding enthusiastically to my “good questions” and patiently worked toward mutual understanding.

#### Further Reflections on Striving to Hear the Participants

I chose to provide the above details of what were some values that dominated the interviewer in this study to establish clearly that the following themes of the participants were largely presented spontaneously.

I had few assumptions about what I was going to hear and as a therapist I pride myself on my ability to hear and engage with the intended meaning being expressed by another. The participants all volunteered the same kind of information without being prompted to do so, and each displayed an unexpected consistency from the most inward of experiences through to his or her professional practice. To understand that this was not a product of specific, purposeful questioning is essential in grasping the significance of the themes that will now be explicated.

### Overview of Themes Arising Through the Interview Process

Self is of course always present and self-relations are a dynamic process, therefore best understood as they are evidenced. The next section describes what processes were revealed as the participants answered my own and their questions.

#### Getting Ready

The participants were similar in their difficulties in initially discussing their self-relations. All of them expressed that they did not know quite how to start despite having read the introductory letter and having a telephone conversation with me prior to our meeting. May was interested in “thinking about myself in a different way” and Abbott felt “open to trusting the process however that goes”. Peeta had prepared for the interview by “thinking about ...my own theory of how human beings work and how I really experience myself as having a core self and then having what some people call parts.” Despite this preparation there was some awkwardness in moving from theory to personal experience. Abbott also experienced some reluctance initially to tell me about his “parts”; his comment was, “Oh, God, I don’t know if I want to tell you.”

Amber was the only participant who had experienced a triggering of unsettling material from her past in the days before our interview. We began our discussion by focusing on her uncomfortable feelings around

“bringing the what’s inside outside”. She realized, as she thought ahead to the interview, that she had been reminded of her past “need to split ...I didn’t feel really traumatized or anything but it just kind of set me back into an old memory ...”

### Further Reflections on Getting Ready

It is significant that the participants intellectually understood the topic of the interviews yet were surprised at the direction inwards that topic would take them. The reader has been encouraged to undertake a verbal exploration of her or his self-relations and an exercise has been provided [see Appendix A ] to assist in this process. When I solicited feedback upon sending the participants a preliminary copy of the analysis, Amber commented, “I know what I *think* but the *experience* is deep”, referring to the “deeply personal” nature of this topic and the difference between thought and experience.

Appreciating the gulf that lies between thinking about self-relations and actually accessing that level of experiencing and verbally describing it, is an awareness this study strives to illuminate. To assist the reader in comprehending the following descriptions of self-relations a visual overview, Pictorial Representations of Four Self-Relations, (p. 169), is provided as a reference as the descriptions unfold.

### Struggling in the Interview or Trying to Explain How You Walk

Amber continued throughout the interview to explicate the profound effect her past had on her self-relations. One such effect was a lack of faith in her ability to “be articulate, be a good interviewee, and have something substantive to say”. At one point, after a break, she came back to the interview and attempting to explain a particularly “slippery” concept she said, “I thought I was going to be more articulate”.

A struggle to be articulate was encountered by all the participants. The audiotapes are filled with long pauses as they endeavour to put words to their internal conceptions. Their frustration can be heard in comments such as “ ...fumble or feel clumsy around articulating something ... and I want to articulate it and I believe important to articulate it but I sometimes don’t always have the words”.

At times the participants grappled with their lack of clarity concerning what they wanted to say, however it was far more common for it to be evident they knew clearly what they wanted to express, the problem lay in their inexperience verbalizing these internal processes. May surmised that her difficulty in finding appropriate words was “because the opportunity to talk about this and put it in words is not something that happens all the time, so there’s a real unfamiliarity putting it into words.” She held that “it seems to be important to me when we’re talking about these kinds of

things to be as precise as I can be". May had a strong sense of the meaning of words to her and she was sensitive to shades of meaning as in when we discussed her sense of "grounded" and "rounded". She said that "when people use those words they are probably similar concepts. But those words don't make it quite right for me." She continued saying, "It feels as if there could be, something could be grounded without it being whole, and that's more or a sensing thing rather than a [pause], it doesn't make sense even as I say it, but there is a feeling to it that it is different."

Peeta commented in our re-interview about her reaction to discussing self-relations during our first interview

I just found it strange to make verbal something that is so sub-verbal, most of the time. It's just like a sub-context of my life, or sub-text, rather, and it's not something that I go around articulating to myself very often, and it was just a weird process to do that, not like weird in a bad way, but just strange.

To make her meaning more tangible Peeta provided this analogy, "It's like trying to explain how you walk ...could you explain verbally how it is that you propel yourself down the sidewalk, and having to talk about all those little details? You don't usually do that, you just walk." Amber echoed Peeta and May's convictions about the reason it was so difficult to express herself, saying, "because it is not commonly talked about and also

because it's not altogether an intellectual process".

An aspect, therefore, of being inarticulate was very much that of the words not adequately capturing the participants' meaning. May found that once she put words to what she wanted to express that the meaning was changed from what she intended. In attempting to make a distinction between two internal processes we had been discussing she found that "language is making it, [pause] I was hesitating before I said that because I thought it makes it sound a lot more separate than it is." She continued saying, "It's so intimate there almost isn't a separation but the words make it sound as if there is, I don't know how to say it." May found that she would be "getting this more in visuals than words ..."

Peeta experienced a similar difficulty in being able to describe her internal processes, she said, "I have a mental, a visual image but it's hard to translate into words. I'm an extremely visual person, it's hard for me sometimes to put things into an auditory channel". Abbott also found himself "struggling to clearly articulate..." and felt embarrassment about his inability to be articulate, naming his comments in the first interview as "babbling".

The participants monitored themselves throughout the interviews, Amber was concerned about "sounding flaky" and would ask me if something she said "made sense". Peeta judged that something she told me

“sort of sounds weird” and something else “sort of seems strange” and then she was concerned that “it sounds so simplistic”. They would also notice when they were responding less thoughtfully or with less awareness than they expected of themselves. When Abbott caught himself using language that suggested to him he was avoiding taking responsibility for an aspect of himself, he noted, “I’m separating myself really quickly ...” When May responded to a question without pausing as was her norm, she remarked that “that was pretty quick.”

The most frustrating aspect of the interviews appeared to occur when my questions would make sense but the participant couldn’t quite get his or her “head around it”. It was at these times there would be the longest pauses and one-word comments such as, “Stuck”. May at times felt like she was “making this up!” and at one point she drew in her breath and said, “...something we said earlier and it’s just disappeared entirely again, shoot!”

With the struggle to verbalize their inner experience came new insights and expanded understandings of their self-relations. It is in this way that this study acted as a catalyst for change.

#### Further Reflections on Struggling in the Interview

The struggle that the participants experienced as they endeavoured to describe their self-relations relates to the nature of experience. As Peeta so

articulately explained, some processes, e.g., walking, are much easier to do than to describe. This limitation is surmountable, given time and vocabulary many experiences can be verbally depicted.

The difficulty the participants had in describing self-relations can also be accounted for by the uniqueness of their task; the opportunity to discuss one's self-relations is not generally available in this culture at this time. Therefore individuals are unfamiliar with consciously accessing the level of internal experience that self-relations occupies.

Another accounting for the difficulty involved with describing self-relations relates to the notion that not all experience can necessarily be captured through verbal language. John Dewy (1979) says,

If all meanings could be adequately expressed by words, the arts of painting and music would not exist. There are values and meanings that can be expressed only by immediately visible and audible qualities, and to ask what they mean in the sense of something that can be put into words is to deny their distinctive existence. (p. 74)

#### Changing Through the Interview Process or "Getting to Know Myself Better"

The interview process provided an opportunity for the participants to struggle in the moment with some concepts and come to new understandings of themselves and others. Amber, thinking about a new

concept, wanted to “see if I can wrap my head around this” and at one point asked me to not elaborate on a particularly convoluted question saying, “No, don’t say too much more ...I’m just going to ramble for a bit.” She found that talking about her self-relations allowed her to “be more proactive in exploring that out loud and get some feedback. Not that you’re saying yes or not right or wrong, but just sort of hearing myself talk and being asked questions so I can stretch my own question for myself.”

Peeta also found the interviews giving her new ways of thinking. Asked about a certain aspect of her belief system she said, “Actually I haven’t thought about that, I’d like to think about it right on the spot.” Another of my questions that linked two concepts she had mentioned was met with “I don’t connect these two things very much but it would be interesting to do that ...” Abbott remarked that “that last question you asked me was quite a lulu, I don’t know if I thought about it in that way before ...it just seems like it’s really a good question.”

The interviews with May were replete with the exploration of new ways of thinking about internal processes. She used the term “coding” to describe her process of noticing something internally and then putting “a word to it or a language to it.” May was intrigued with some questions that were put to her, particularly since some of my questions were “good questions, I’m saying good questions because I’m thinking that too!” She

described hearing herself talk as “it sounds interesting to me when it’s just inside myself, having said it”. Her words would be “ringing in my ears as I say it.” During the interviews May often shared new thoughts that had “just popped into my mind ...”

During the interview thinking in new ways about herself or himself was common for each participant. In discussing her past Amber found “that this is a new way of thinking, those two things, events come together that way.” As the participants explicated their self-relations their understanding of themselves was apparently shifting and that they were developing a more formulated conception of their self-relations. My questions would often prompt an attention to processes that had hitherto been so familiar as to be invisible. Thoughts would “come to mind”, an idea would surface that the participant hadn’t “thought of in this way”. Comments like, “Isn’t that interesting, I haven’t thought of it like that before and yet that’s what it feels like” were common.

As they worked through their new understandings the participants allowed themselves to guess and try on different associations. They began sentences with “maybe ...”, and “I’m thinking now ...”, and “it strikes me all of a sudden ...”, and “when I ponder and play around with it.” They would incorporate my responses and change their constructs accordingly. When I asked a clarifying question of May she corrected herself saying, “No, you’re

right ...” and proceeded to develop her description of internal processes in a fundamentally new direction.

The second interview allowed for the tracking of any changes that the first interview might have engendered. Having been asked about her internal language in the first interview May told me in the second interview that in referring to herself internally she noticed using “I” since you drew my attention to it.” Amber, the participant who found the research topic to be evocative of a core issue that continues to trouble her, found that after our talk, I felt quite liberated and quite kind of enthusiastic on the inside, like excitable or something, kind of like an “I did it”, like “oh, I did it”, like I’m right out loud, and at the same time I think later that night ... I felt kind of a little unsettled about, just unsettled, dipping in the way that we did.

Amber had a third interview and it was during this interview she revealed that the contexts in which she experiences herself “in a pure deep kind of sense ...by having re-visited those places, I’ve remembered them and somehow been able to tap into that place a little more mindfully.” She used this new mindfulness during a supervision session when her supervisor was “suggesting I was in my head and I needed to take the plunge and go inside, that helped me to think ‘oh right, to the self’, that would be a good place to go ...”

After the first interview May was thinking about what I had talked about, what we had talked about, and the struggle we had with language, or that I had had with language ...Some reflecting on how perhaps not having the language is indicative of how our culture, the importance our culture doesn't put on this kind of self-knowledge.

The participants agreed that the interviews had provided an opportunity that was unique. May remarked that "what we're talking about is very interesting, and it just occurs to me that, just watching my own reaction to it, how neat it would be if there were more opportunities for all of us to talk about these things."

Peeta appreciated the opportunity to "review and think about how much progress I've made over my life, considering my background ...it was a neat experience to reflect on that, it gave me feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction ..." Abbott valued "the opportunity to get to know myself better".

Amber was "surprised at how much charge around say, for example, the word 'visible'. How very unsettled I felt and kind of choked up at times ...and I got really quite tender ... I think it was just very tender material and I was surprised at how deeply I felt that ..."

Amber was not the only participant to experience emotion during or

after an interview. Peeta, during the second interview, was contrasting the dysfunctional parenting she received and the supportive parenting her nephew has received. As she spoke of his faith in himself and sense of entitlement as compared to what she battled with as a teenager she felt “sad right now thinking about it”. This was a painful issue for Peeta, at the end of the re-interview when she was asked to recall her feelings during the interviews she remembered feeling “some sadness and some grief, and some anger, just sort of fleeting, about having to do that whole process ...it’s been an interesting struggle, but then, why do you want your whole life to be about struggling to undo the effects of your childhood ...?”

May remarked that “it’s felt really stimulating and it’s funny, there’s a sense of excitement that’s come with it, and frustration, perhaps not having the words.” Feelings of frustration were also part of Amber’s experience during the interviews, she commented that

it was exasperating at times because experience, although it is helpful to articulate so we can have a shared conversation about an experience, much of it was really difficult to express verbally and describe articulately, because it isn’t about concrete thoughts and ideas and sort of practical things, more complex than that ... I think it is useful for me to do that [describe internal experience] because then it helps me, too, to make the internal or covert, overt, so that I can

have it at another level ...more external level or something, it adds to it somehow.

#### Overview of Thematic Presentation of Individual Participants

The following section details the principal theme, concerning the participants' descriptions of their self-relations, that emerged from the analysis of the data. In order not to lose the remarkable and unexpected consistency the participants demonstrated regarding particular aspects of the research interviews, the decision was made to present each participant individually in the discussion of this theme.

#### The Inherent Correspondence Between the Participants' Self-Relations and Their Therapeutic Interventions

During the analysis it became evident that each participant had utilized a figure of speech, otherwise termed a "figurative trope", e.g., metaphor, analogy, imagery (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), that differed from the other participants and that reflected an organizing aspect of their self-relations. Their particular figurative trope remained consistent throughout discussions of (a) their way of accessing internal experience, (b) their expression of those experiences, (c) the nature of their core struggle, (d) the manner in which he or she processed her or his issues, and (e) how they understood their clients' issues and subsequently what interventions they utilized as therapists.

Arising from the noting of this consistency in the use of figurative speech a marked correspondence was identified that was present from the most internal of the participants' experiences through to their work as therapists. Each participant was asked the same few questions [see Interview Questions]. Their answer to the question "what process is involved between my asking you a question and the pause that ensues before you answer the question?" begins each description of their interviews.

#### Peeta

Peeta consistently used imagery to explain and embellish her descriptions of her internal world throughout the two interviews. She relied on imagery to access the replies to my questions, she portrayed her self-relations through imagery and she detailed a typical intervention with a client that involved the use of imagery.

#### Internal process involved with answering a question

Peeta readily began her description of the internal process she experienced when responding to my questions.

Right now, I'm tracking what's going on inside, trying to get a mental picture, and I think when you ask me a question and I'm trying to retrieve the answer, I think a lot of the things that I think of happen first in my consciousness or whatever as visual images, and then I

have to translate them into words ...

She continued with the reflection that the information came to her both visually and kinesthetically and then she strove to “put it into language which is auditory and linear.” The “collection of images” she experienced were “not all that coherent sometimes”, they consisted of “little snippets of scenes, of things I’ve experienced, I’ll have memories or I’ll see faces of clients, or I’ll remember sort of the overall bodily experience of being with somebody and I’ll have that sensation again”. Peeta struggled to find the words to describe her experience, characterizing it as “a visual, kinesthetic sort of blend of some kind of sense that’s more like an intuition, it’s really hard to put into words”.

#### Describing internal dynamics

Consistent with her description of a blend of visual and kinesthetic images involved with answering questions, Peeta used imagery throughout the interviews as a means to enrich her portrayal of her inner life. She pictures her critical mother “introject” as being “evilly snarky from the sidelines” and she experienced this introject as having “tentacles that were kind of like infiltrated into the core self”.

An integral part of Peeta’s belief system involves the concept of having a healthy core self made up of functional parts and a system of “aberrant patterns” that are “stuck on me from outside” and “sponge off the core

self". Her profound sense of this construct began early, she describes poetry written during her troubled teen and young adult years as having "images of jewels or lights or things that were sort of beautiful and clear and so on, that were encrusted with, with garbage and muck and scabs". Peeta described her hope, during this painful time in her life, as "buried and it was in the dark, and it was hidden from me".

Peeta began therapy and spent "probably about three years doing that initial sort of trying to break the crust off the outside" and then "rays started poking through the muck" and she knew "that it was going to be okay". Peeta has remained committed to doing personal work and has worked in different ways with different therapists. She is aware that despite her many gains that "a lot of the time I feel like there's a kind of damp blanket around me that keeps my core self from soaring the way it could."

#### Having a core struggle

As with all the participants, Peeta identified a central issue that she ongoingly struggles to overcome. Her understanding is that she has a core self and she also has "distress patterns or neurotic patterns which I see as something that is not myself, I don't really identify that much with them, even though they're things I have to live with and deal with". Peeta recognizes that the distress patterns or "baggage" is "part of my

personality that I present to the world, part of how I act” and that she does “disidentify with them to some extent but not totally because I’m, they’re still with me, I still have to deal with them”.

Peeta believes that individuals develop “neurotic patterns” from early experiences:

...you’re hurt by something, like say your mother screams at you and starts hitting you ...and you have this trauma experience, which is what it is every time a child is beaten or hit or smacked or screamed at it’s like a small traumatic event, it might not be on the scale of sexual abuse but it’s still trauma...and [if] the child is just repeatedly traumatized and there’s no outlet for them, then that pattern, those feelings and all the sights and sounds and stimulus around it start getting sort of rigidly locked into what I call patterns so the pattern starts to be built from a series of those kinds of experiences ...So I mean for me being invalidated and criticized and put down and screamed at and hit was a common trauma that I experienced over and over and over in my childhood so that thing of being, feeling self-critical and defensive and all the sort of permeations of that part, that aberration self, came from those traumas and being unable to find any outlet for that.

The costs of these “aberrant patterns” for Peeta is that “there is a lot of

dissonance and there's a lot of lack of integration between what's happening inside and what's happening outside and the outside self becomes much more contrived, like it's much more orchestrated". Later she elaborated, saying, "What happens when I get my buttons pushed is that I flip over, I lose my sense of core self ...and I'm just acting out from a real feeling of distress and I feel like an automaton, where my self, whatever the thing that interacts with the world is being controlled by this pattern and so I do things I wouldn't normally do." This consequence of "going into pattern" (doing things she would not normally do) is particularly painful for Peeta, "when I'm out of my core self, out of touch with it ...if I'm caught up in the baggage ...it's almost like I'm split off from myself, I feel almost like a puppet, where I do things that I don't really want to do, that aren't congruent with my values, aren't congruent with my sense of self".

In the second interview Peeta had the opportunity to expand on her understanding of "being in pattern" versus being in her "core self" and she explained that it might "seem like I'm either absolutely in pattern or not, which is how I tend to think about it, but I know it's not quite that simple." She continued saying, " ...it's really hard to articulate [pause], there are some patterns, some neurotic patterns or distress patterns or whatever that are so subtle and so chronic that they're hard to even see, they're just kind of like, they're still the ones that have tentacles into my core self ...

and those tentacles or those infiltrations are so chronic and so subtle that I'm not even aware of how much they influence my core self or how much they shape it." Her difficulty at times in recognizing "the tentacles" means that "the baggage that I carry around, sometimes I slip into identifying with it, if I'm triggered or if I'm really distressed or stressed out or something like that, but I see that identification sort of being a false identification". Peeta further clarified her internal experience by drawing a distinction between "chronic and intermittent patterns", chronic being the subtle ones and intermittent the more obvious triggered reactions to criticism or perceived threat in some way.

#### Processing issues

Peeta not only works as a therapist, she continues to see her own therapist. Asked about the role of therapy in her life she said, "it's been a really important part of my life, I don't think I could have done the healing and growth and all the rest that I've done without doing therapy". Peeta used imagery to explain how therapy has helped her deal with her "patterns": "if you think of patterns as being these entities ...these creatures that lock onto you and occlude, cover your intelligence and make you less functional and filter into your psyche ...they thrive on negative messages, put-downs, invalidations ...the more you get of those the stronger they get and if you contradict those messages ...and you actually

hear people validating you and appreciating you and caring ...those patterns starve ...they wither, they start getting smaller ...that's only a metaphor, but that's how I experience it ...”

When she does get triggered and reacts to a situation in a way she does not feel good about she has learned to be “quite forgiving of myself because I recognize I was in a pattern”. Peeta has learned that she needs to “work through the feelings that are underlying ...usually it's some kind of feeling in me that I can't deal with ...I start feeling scared and threatened and hurt and misunderstood ...so if I can just stop the process and step out of it and go somewhere else , like go with someone who I feel safe with or even with myself, so that I can write it out ...get in touch with the feelings that triggered me into that state in the first place and discharge them, like cry or express them verbally ...then I can dissipate and get out of that so I'm back to my core self again”.

Once Peeta is back in her core self she feels a need to apologize to the individual to which she has had a reaction. She will “as soon as possible go to them and say, ‘I was really triggered and I was acting, some part of myself had taken over and I'm really sorry ...that's not something that I should have done or would normally do and I'm sorry if it hurt you' ...so I just try and make amends for it”.

### Working with clients

In describing her work with clients Peeta often used the same images she had in describing her own internal process, e.g., “so she feels like an automaton, she feels body and mental functions but nothing more, like there’s no spark, there’s no feeling for anything she is doing, indifferent to everything”. Another client is quoted, “she describes herself as feeling like a void”, Peeta continues discussing her perceptions of this client’s internal world, saying, “there’s not much sense of an ‘I’ there, the ‘I’ is there but it feels blank, it feels disconnected and blank”. This is similar to Peeta’s experiences during her teenage and young adult years when she “didn’t feel like myself at all ...I was just like this robot ...all the time, every interaction ...some part of me was off in a corner watching and just thinking, “who is that?””

Peeta uses her self-understanding to conceptualize her client’s difficulties, “I think there’s a pattern, an aberrant pattern, or aberrant self ...that is the sole function of which is to keep her from feeling her emotions, that’s what it is for.” In her own past Peeta experienced that her “core self was so threatened ...had been so traumatized that it ...I don’t know if it felt like I needed this but somehow the patterns just rallied around and just took over and it was not pleasant at all ...for one thing I felt disconnected all the time and for another thing the pattern was not an

attractive person at all.”

Similar to her own experience, Peeta understands the client’s pattern as “at some time it thought it was being helpful because she had a horrendously abusive childhood ...she was so traumatized and so hurt that this pattern, aberrant self, took over and just blocked, shut down the whole emotional process inside her”.

Peeta recognizes that she uses her own experience in providing therapy to her clients. She tries “to be really sensitive to letting the clients name their own internal parts. I don’t use my names.” In doing parts work with clients Peeta acknowledges that “my own work with parts in my therapy and also just my own concept of myself does influence how I am able to recognize parts in other people”.

Peeta described a therapeutic exercise that uses imagery to help clients learn to tolerate affect; such use of imagery is consistent with Peeta’s way of processing her own issues. She uses her voice to reach a client who is dissociating during the session, she will “tell them to come back ...I want you to listen to my voice and come right back. I don’t want you to stay there, I want you to come to me”. Discussing this technique Peeta connected with the wish that when she was having such a difficult time as a young adult that she “had someone that would call me back ...nobody recognised what was going on or they just thought I was sort of

jerk or something”.

When asked to comment on what she imagined her clients felt about being dissociative she said that “I think that they feel like they’re missing out on their lives ...”

### Abbott

Abbott’s choice of figurative language was the use of analogies that contained an action component; as with the other participants the use of one type of figurative trope in describing his internal world remained consistent throughout his discussion of personal and professional matters. His therapeutic interventions also demonstrated his inclination to focus on movement and processing thoughts and feelings.

#### Internal process involved with answering a question

When asked what process occurred internally between my asking a question and his verbalizing an answer, Abbott paused and then said, “I would call it reflecting”. Questioned for more detail he went on to say, “Well, it’s to, for me, what goes on is, when I hear a question, and then I just let it resonate within me. So, I’d pause and see what that stirs within myself.” Asked if this was a kinesthetic sense, Abbott replied

Sometimes it would be a physical feeling or it could be a visceral feeling, or if you’d ask me something, my throat closed, I went, ‘Oh, I’d kind of get curious about that, as soon as I can breathe again, why did

my throat close?" So, yeah, I tend to do that, I go, 'Oh, wow, when you asked me that question I felt sad, I'm curious about that.'

Again I sought clarification by commenting that it sounded as if there was quite a bit of thinking involved when he processed a question. He elaborated that there was "thinking and feeling and marinating with it, that's what I would call it, marinate within ...so it's just kind of for me to go into process, that's what I'm doing, sort of checking it out, one part might have a different answer than another part."

#### Describing internal dynamics

Throughout both interviews Abbott employed several analogies in describing his internal world and his understanding of people overall. Various aspects of being a therapist dominated the content of Abbott's responses. He finds that "sometimes I struggle with seeing people in a different light than most people see them." An analogy helped Abbott to explain what he meant by "seeing people in a different light"

...if your job is a cabinet maker, and somebody comes in and says, 'Will you build me a cabinet ...' and the cabinet maker goes, 'Sure, okay' and builds this cabinet ...this tangible item they go away with and so that's how they see the person, they see them in that context. Well, I think that being a therapist we see people and connect with them on a different level than most people do in the world, which is sad, I wish

people would connect on that real level more often ... there's a different level of vulnerability that we see in people when they come here ...and I don't think that's a place where there's much room for that in the world ... a lot of times I see people really resist that or deny that, when I'm out in the world. So that's how I think I see people differently, in that sense.

To manage his own feelings of vulnerability, particularly after an intense session with a client, Abbott uses physical techniques combined with active images. He practices a "series of exercises and body movements to loosen up tension and increase breathing ... When I'm doing it I use imagery of letting go of things or throwing them off my body."

In discussing his own issues and those of his clients Abbott described how feelings may surface for which there is no apparent cause. Despite being able to say "I don't believe my feelings are in charge of me at all", there are times when Abbott is "not conscious what the emotional charge is about so when I'm not conscious of it it's really difficult to address".

Two analogies were utilized to embellish on his beliefs and experiences around feelings. The first concerned a roller coaster, in that, although he has "yet to get on a roller coaster that I don't feel afraid of before I get on, I still do it, because I'm able to go 'Yeah, I'm afraid and my fear is about not knowing what it's going to do when I get on and the other part of me

knows this is really exciting and once I get in here and strapped in and start going it will be exciting and I'll get used to it and then it'll be another experience”.

The second analogy, which entails automobiles, describes an occasion Abbott experienced when he had a feeling and did not know the cause. He explained, “ ...most of us drive cars and most of the time we're in control of the vehicle but then something happens to the vehicle that we're not aware of and then we're not in full control of that vehicle. It could be a clogged gas line or whatever ... in this case it was an old trauma that had been triggered but I never made the connection.” He went to explain how he resolved having such feelings, “So I had these feelings bubbling up that I couldn't really get my finger on ...once I could figure out what it was it resolved itself quite quickly, ‘Oh that's what was wrong, that's not happening”.

#### Having a core struggle

Throughout the interviews Abbott would return to what he identified as a cardinal deficit that he struggles to correct. All the participants spontaneously named an internal process on which they strove to improve. They perceived that their deficits were obstacles that prevented them from being how they envisioned they could be. The struggle to improve was specific to each and corresponded closely to their approach to personal

change and promoting change in their clients.

Abbott's dissatisfaction with aspects of himself concerned a tendency to get "disconnected from myself internally" at times. He recognizes this is happening "when if I'm acting in a way that might imply that I'm disconnected ...I might say to myself, geese, I've been agitated for two days, this is really odd. What's going on, or if I get feedback from somebody ..." Feedback may be "one of my kids says, 'You're uptight or what's going on?' So that, those are cues to me to kind of slow down and check with myself."

He finds that it is when "I get too busy externally that I get lost, or disconnected from myself internally." For Abbott the experience of being "disconnected" can entail a sense of "acting different on the outside than I feel on the inside, than I know in the inside ...so I would be incongruent with myself." Another aspect of feeling "disconnected" occurs "when I would be in conflict with myself, I dunno, maybe avoid things and procrastinate or [pause] be indecisive about something."

Understanding his inner world as being comprised of many "parts" Abbott finds "that there are some times that I struggle around the incongruencies ..." These incongruencies may arise when "I feel one way about something and I'm presenting another way for some purpose ..." Abbott realizes that he may behave incongruently when he has an

unconscious motivation “because there may be a residual experience that I’ve had that I’ve tapped into emotionally so the issue becomes much bigger than it actually is.” For Abbott this represents a time when “I’m being motivated more by my emotions than *by who I am* [italics added].”

The conceptualizing of a “real me” is central to Abbott’s struggle with feelings of incongruence and disconnectedness. He believes that he has a “core self” and when he is disconnected from that core self he characterizes himself as “not me”. A paradoxical example of this was provided by Abbott. When he is “disconnected” he may behave “with one of my kids I might be over zealous, on their case about something they did. I might say, ‘That’s just the way it is and this is who I am. I’m your dad, you’re going to listen to me’ ...” He then added, “So that would be an example of me using that as an excuse of ‘this is who I am’ when it’s not true at all”.

During the second interview I questioned Abbott about this notion of “not me”. His response when I asked him where the “not me” was coming from if it wasn’t “me” provided a more detailed description of his internal world. “I think it would certainly be coming from a place within myself that is in conflict, I would be looking for an easy way out ...because I don’t have the energy, a willingness to work through.” When I commented that it sounded like it was a part of himself he continued, “it is a part of me ...it’s a part I don’t like though. I don’t find it particularly useful.”

This part of Abbott creates difficult feelings for him, “I often find it a very humbling experience when I make an ass out of myself, and I need to come back and do some work around resolving what actually went on ... there’s certainly a part of myself that, when I act in a disconnected fashion and I offend others or hurt other people or whatever, I don’t feel good about it.”

### Processing issues

When Abbott recognizes he is “disconnected” he has several strategies he employs to “get connected” again. Chief among such strategies is to “ask myself a lot of questions” which involves “balances and checks and pros and cons”. When “I do something different on the outside than I’m feeling on the inside I usually feel that uncertainty or I might sometimes call it a betrayal of myself. ‘What are you doing that for?’ Or ‘how could you do that when you -?’ here I go with the questions again!” He will “scurry around and work with it and try and figure it out, and until I touch base with it I can’t fully understand it.” This process may also involve “some pretty deep soul-searching where I’m looking at what my beliefs are”; along with processing cognitively he relies on “my gut” and “my intuition”, intuition is defined as “a hunch ...educated, knowing, intellectual ...”

Abbott has experience as a client in therapy and experience as a therapist. Several years ago he recognized that “within myself there was

something out of whack with me and the only way I knew how to do that was work with other people to help me understand that and the more I worked with people the more curious I got about the whole process of therapy.”

### Working with clients

Abbott’s way of dealing with his own issues has many similarities to the way he understands and works with clients. He understood this research project to be about “how I am as a therapist ...and my knowledge about who I am or who I consider myself to be and a collection of probably experiences of different parts of myself, how I use that in my work and what kinds of frameworks and structures I work with clients, help them integrate different aspects of themselves.”

The purpose of therapy in Abbott’s opinion is for clients to “get to know themselves and understand what they need and have the kind of lifestyle they want.” In keeping with his dynamic approach to processing issues Abbott believes that “it’s all in the relationship, the interaction of the relationship, so my relationship with a client is to help them understand themselves so they can have a better relationship with themselves.”

“Authentic self“ is another concept that Abbott not only believes in for himself but also for his clients. As a person, and as a therapist he works “to be as authentic as I possibly can with my clients and ...usually that’s

their goal, I think more and more I work with people, that's where they come to. At first when they first come they may be driven or motivated by an issue that's an external force in their life, when they come and start to work and take a look at who they are, and how they are in the world, that brings them closer to their authentic selves as well."

Another similarity between Abbott's own belief system and his beliefs about clients is his emphasis on the "real me". He described how in sessions he will "challenge the ways they do things or have them become aware of what *it's really like in there*" [italics added]. His technique of questioning himself is also a goal he has for his clients, "I want them to become introspective about themselves, I want them to become curious about what they're doing, and how come they do that, and what do they think they're going to get if they do that."

### Amber

Amber used metaphors as she strove to characterize her inner world. Her cardinal struggle and most essential experience were depicted through metaphors and her personal work and her work as a therapist relies on using metaphor in the process of change.

### Internal process involved with answering a question

When asked what process occurred internally between my asking a question and her verbalization of an answer Amber paused briefly and

then replied, “Okay, [pause] like now. Sometimes pictures, sometimes it feels almost like I’m searching through a file box, with files in it, for something that looks like it’ll fit with what the question’s asking, that one’s fairly common.” When I commented on the visual nature of her processing, she added that “sometimes it’s [pause], I think what I’m experiencing is tapping into the quiet place that knows the answer to your question.” During the first interview when I asked Amber a question concerning something in her past, she paused and then explained, “I’m sort of scanning contexts in a way right now, trying to picture places ...”

Another aspect of her internal processing when answering a question was revealed as we continued to discuss Amber’s experience as a participant in the study, “ ...thinking back to maybe the first time [first interview], when I had some anxious times when I was sort of travelling around in there, so I would imagine that sometimes it’s about editing, there’s a knowing side, and there’s the kind of bringing it forward and then deciding, maybe the part of the process of deciding what’s going to get said.” Amber believed that this internal process of editing probably originated from “the black place that’s saying ‘are you sure you want to say that?’, you know, the judge, or the aspect of myself that’s not sure if it’s accurate ...”

### Describing internal dynamics

The three interviews with Amber were liberally sprinkled with metaphors that she used to depict her inner experience. A central metaphor referred to often was that of a tree. Amber traced the origins of the tree metaphor back to her childhood and “being in elementary school and having some kind of ideas and thoughts about the parallels between the life of a tree and a person. Like the kind of miracle of it all too, that ...can’t be described particularly, like magic you know.” The magic for Amber related to “the tree and the survival and the growth and the development and how it hibernates and looks dead and springs back to life in the springtime and those kinds of magical, amazing qualities.”

The trauma she experienced as a child is reflected in a story she wrote about “a seed and it was blown by the wind and had taken root and grew and ...the tree gets cut down and lumbered and ends up in the river and gets milled and made into an umbrella ...” Upon reflection Amber noted that, “I think I was imagining being a seed and trying to track the experience of the seed as all the things that happened to it [voice drops], then got kind of lost in the story, kind of felt like I was in the story but didn’t really put it together with, ‘Gee, that really is like me’ I don’t remember thinking like that.”

The tree metaphor over time “has evolved a lot ...and has a different

kind of meaning for me.” Amber will “come back to a metaphor of trees often, when I think of myself and I use that metaphor to kind of relocate myself in the centre of myself when I feel kind of out of whack ...” The metaphor has evolved so that “in some ways it represents a core, that has roots and I kind of picture a tree and its parts, how it’s affected by weather and man infringing on its natural growth and reaching out for nourishment and bringing in elements from the earth to survive and to thrive and that there are seasons of particular hardship that affects how the tree is growing ...”

Another metaphor Amber used to describe the sense of trauma and damage to her self-image she has struggled with is that of “pale coloured flowers” put in food colouring to create “mint green carnations” that “don’t actually grow that colour they just look that colour and so that kind of distorted something toxic in the system altering the look of the plant ...” This sense of “being toxic on the inside” is a core issue for Amber. During the first interview it was evidently very important to her to believe that the “black place” was not preeminent in her development, rather, she has a “life force” or “energy source ...a lot of light in that place, it’s vibrant ...it doesn’t waver or fluctuate very much. It can be covered over, but it doesn’t go away ...” Tying the two metaphors of the tree and the green carnations together she expressed a hopeful belief that “if I could go all the way back

to the spark that helps me to consider there's a life force or an energy cell or a central core of being that existed before the contaminants, before the food colouring entered the system of the cut flower or before the seasons were harsh, and damaged the tree, altered its course of growth and so on."

The inner experience of having several "aspects of myself" is described by Amber as "the parts ... [are like] petals around a flower, they're all part of a wonderful thing, a beautiful thing, they're all valid and valuable ...". She imagines her clients who "often times don't have access to many of their parts" as being "in a little booth or something and they just have one film running, and that they're locked down and cut off from themselves and other parts of themselves."

#### Having a core struggle

Amber began the first interview with the information that in thinking about the introductory letter it had "just prompted me to travel backwards a bit and think about when I felt 'beside myself'. It was sort of an elusive feeling that I was perfectly functional and could study and relate and do things in the world but didn't feel connected with myself in some way. It was like I was operating slightly askew from the center of me." She describes being "outside myself" as "not centered in my body or in my, I don't know, some self" and "physiologically feeling a bit spaced out. Fairly easily distracted, feeling lack of ability to really track what's going on

between me and others or even observing others in interactions, kind of disjointed in a way.” She acknowledged that feeling “beside myself” “still comes and goes. I wish that I didn’t have to accept that but that does seem to happen sometimes.

The early childhood traumas that Amber experienced meant that, ...it wasn’t safe to be in myself because it was too scary, too life-threatening to speak about my experience, certainly my emotional world, but even on a more concrete level, just my daily living experience was - I don’t know exactly but quite often traumatic but in order to cope with the trauma and the crisis and the chaos and the lack of attachments, opportunities to attach, I figured out, not intellectually but experientially I figured out how to survive by operating from different selves.

Amber now understands that there were “some experiences that were so intimidating and I was so petrified that I made a commitment not to live inside myself. I wouldn’t be here today I don’t think if I had taken a risk to be real ...” She continues to carry “a tremendous amount of self-doubt about my worthiness of being alive, based on some of the traumas that I’ve experienced.” Not only did Amber provide vivid and detailed descriptions of her recollections of her core struggle, she graciously described some feelings and thoughts she experienced in the moment

connected to this painful issue.

In talking about the “black place” and her sense of worthiness Amber identified that “what would be really helpful for me would be if I could be really grounded in that belief that ...that essence, light and core and energy [has always been there]. Then somehow I could not be as bothered by the early traumas.” At this point in the interview she said, “I feel pretty upset right now”. After confirming that she wanted to continue Amber continued to describe the essence of the struggle,

it feels very life and death-related, it’s not even about worth as much as it is the right to be alive. That the coverings or the events, or the incidents or whatever traumas ...it’s like over top of or part of or even as the base of my existence so it’s more ...I feel more peaceful about me and my essence should this sort of fundamental element of self be this life-force rather than this putrid gluck that I was born into.

Her belief about which part of her is fundamental “varies, I want it to be this essential part ...the It, the soulful part, and I believe that with my brain. But when I, even as I talk about that I feel this sort of sick tight horrible fear that that might not be true. That maybe it’s the black place.”

#### Processing issues

The tree metaphor provides an immediate resource in Amber’s quest to be in touch with her “authentic core”. She pictures “a sort of a channel or

something in the centre of a tree much like I can visualize inside myself, and opening the channel, and drawing from the earth.” In the past she would “take my shoes off and rub my feet on the ground and it would help to bring my energy back down inside myself”. As a therapist there are times when in a session “its been supercharged or super painful or super confrontational or something really intense” and she “can feel myself kind of constricting a little bit”. At such times Amber finds it helpful to think of “the channel part, like the sense of having a passageway” and to “have that sort of sense of taking a breath down into the centre of my belly and feeling that relax ...”

In speaking about her past and the sense of sadness she carries, Amber stated that “I think accepting it has been one of the gifts that I’ve been able to give myself through some of my own personal work.” She believes that “it is an ongoing process but to accept that this is who I am and where I came from and what happened to me and how I came to understand things and now I can decide to understand them differently.” This realization that she has a choice about her beliefs “is still new and when I remember and am in touch with I have choice, I’m more than the black place isn’t very experienced really.” Although a part of her “believes that it’s useful to believe that my essential part of my central being, my core, my universal soul part, is life and light and energy” she finds that

there are still times when she will “get lost in or can contemplate or fear that the black place is the true place, the real one ...” During the interview as she spoke of this she felt “a tightness in my chest, I feel scared, I feel in touch with that kind of real underlying panic ...” She described to me a sense of “even when I was in and describing and affirming and clarifying the light place ... up came lurking in the shadows this black place ...” Processing in the moment, Amber could “feel the struggle but I feel a beckoning, like, it’s gentle and it’s quiet and just, you don’t have to live in the black place.”

One method Amber uses to process her struggle between being in the “black place” or being in her “authentic core” is to talk to other people about their beliefs in “that place”. She felt sadness during the interview “because I know that I have this experience of this part and this place inside yet I’m always asking other people to tell me, ‘What is it? What is that place?...” Despite her self-doubts after talking about these issues she finds that “for a week I’ll look at the water and it will have a different shimmer to it, and I’ll go, I know that place, I’ll reminisce about little kernels of experience where I was in touch with that place or live in that place, or could be supported by that place in my being in the world.”

#### Working with clients

Amber’s self-understanding is also the basis of her understanding of

her clients' issues and therefore her interventions are modelled on this basic understanding. She believes her clients have an authentic core and also have "parts". Her interventions focus on promoting integration and working through core beliefs around worth. She identifies early childhood trauma as a major factor in the resources and coping strategies available to that person as an adult.

When asked what she imagines are the feelings her clients may have about dissociating and revealing themselves in therapy, Amber concluded that her clients may well experience fear with "a disclosure of self in the therapy".

### May

May differed from the other participants in that her most essential internal experience was of a "not-self", a "soul". Her Buddhist spiritual practice includes a daily routine of meditation intended to train her "awareness". As she "goes deeper" her "awareness shifts from a thinking to a sensing" and "May is pretty much out of there". Asked what has the awareness if May is no longer there she replied that "the awareness has shifted entirely to some other level".

May was similar to the other participants in that her internal self-relations remained consistent with her understanding of herself and her clients. Her mode of describing internal processes relied on the use of

conceptualizations that were a combination of an image and a concept. These conceptualizations were used to describe her most essential experiences and struggles and they were also used to assist her in articulating her perceptions about working with clients.

Internal process involved with answering a question

When asked what process occurred internally between my asking a question and her verbalization of an answer May said that she was asking myself that, too. It feels as if I'm darting from one possibility to another, and taking it one or two steps ahead, and then countering it with a question, maybe anticipating your next question ...and then dead-ending, and realizing, well, no, that there's more to it than that, and then going on and trying another one.

May described this process as "trying to find a word that comes as close to this notion I've got as I can". When asked what she meant by "notion" she elaborated saying, "notion, concept, feeling, idea whatever it is we happen to be lighting on at the time ...it's a mental and a felt process ..." May described feeling a "sense of this is the right track" when she found words that fit what she was attempting to describe. She likened this feeling to "experiences that I've had myself in my own therapy, those A-ha, those 'ah, yeah'. It's right in one's, almost, the body, it's a felt thing ...The right word is matched with the concept, that's kind of what I'm looking

for.” She then added, “there’s an interplay of felt and cognitive ...and visual, too, and then it is brought in and I feel it, ‘is that okay?’ and then if it’s not, it gets chucked out, and then the cognitive goes back to work.”

#### Describing internal dynamics

As May strove to portray her internal experience she often struggled to find words to convey her meaning. At such times she would utilize images as they related to ideas in order to communicate her meaning. In describing the goal she desires from her spiritual practice she stated that “the practice for me is trying to get more and more to a level of daily, hourly, awareness.” May wanted to put into words the difficulties involved with achieving this goal saying that it “feels like trying to pat your head and rub your tummy all at the same time, it takes concentration ...” She was dissatisfied with this description saying “that’s not very accurate. The language is so clumsy, it’s like trying to push a needle in with a sledge hammer.” I mentioned in a subsequent interview that I was unfamiliar with this aphorism and she told me that she “just made it up ...I feel as if I’m trying to express something that’s really delicate and the words are too big, too bulky, they smash the delicacy of what I’m trying to say, before it gets out.”

Throughout the interview May referred to a preferred internal state as “deeper versus superficial”, “on instead of off”, and “round rather than

flat". Pressed to clarify these concepts May elaborated that "deep"

has to be a little bit slower, I think that's where the thoughtful part comes in, whereas superficial is more nimble and it can just scuttle like a water insect on the surface, it can kind of move from one thing to the next. And yet, but deeper isn't just round, there's some linear aspect to it as well, because there's deep and then deeper and then deeper.

When May and I reviewed this last statement in our second interview, she attempted to expand on what she means when she says that "deeper is round and superficial is flat". She said, "It's something I can see and feel and I'm trying to find the word that goes with it, to illustrate the contrast and I don't seem to be able to ..." The tendency to get "this more in visuals than words" was evident throughout the interviews with May, despite her continued efforts to describe what she could "see" and "feel". May could describe her experience when she feels

spread thin ...it's as if spread thin means that I'm too far away from this thing that I call my soul. A quick visual would be, if the soul is in the middle and during the day everything gets further and further out, almost on a flat plane, but this is round in the centre, I have to gather it back in, in order to feel the kind of all rightness that I have learned to prefer.

She also experienced the creation of dichotomies when she tried to verbalize a distinction she noticed when discussing her self-relations. One example is when she spoke of “beginning to sense that it’s almost like there’s two Mays, in a way, there’s the conditioned May and the aware May. That draws far too thick a line but that’s sort of coming out as we talk.”

#### Having a core struggle

The demands of May’s spiritual practice require that she strive to be constantly “working on maintaining awareness, without interruption.” Her aim is “maintaining that awareness as an ongoing practice.” She experiences a “longing for the state of mind, the peacefulness and the sense of being focused ...” Her spiritual practice “reminds me of where I’m heading, where I want to be or go, depending on where I am and so, it gives me a reference point feeling-wise and sensation-wise and I’m trying to get myself back to that.”

What prevents May from maintaining the level and kind of awareness she desires is what she calls her “conditioning”. She was “taught as a child to be nice and polite and put people at their ease, and to ignore the way it feels to me ...so the conditioning is not pay attention to my own reactions.” She finds that there are times when she will “not pay attention to what’s right for this being” and that could be putting aside her need to meditate

to attend to someone else.

Her sense of being “spread thin”, mentioned previously, is a part of her struggle in maintaining awareness. She finds that “it’s as if I get thinner, there’s a diminished quality somehow with the various demands and requirements that are being made on me during the day ...”

### Processing issues

To deal with the “spread thin” feeling May will use exercise as a way to regain the favoured sense of feeling “round”. She says, “It’s only fairly recently, in the last five or six years, that I’ve made the connection of how much physical activity can assist me ...” Her experience is that

something happens when I work out, to my awareness, that’s beneficial as compared to when I don’t. If I can work out, to stimulate the body, allow it to move, I think the awareness comes back into the body more quickly and there’s much more a sense of roundness again when I get home than if I didn’t.

May finds that “if I go home without it [exercise], I’m still spread thinly, there’s a mild sense of anxiety ... and I need half an hour to meditate to kind of bring it back in again.”

To maintain the sense of calmness and “roundness” she prefers, May will engage in a process of understanding experiences in her day that she will “explore and work through”. She focuses on “being aware of what

happened ...and what I need to do for myself, ultimately". She knows she has accomplished this "working through" when "it's as if I find a place where words become organized and settled, it finds the right place, and then I know it's in the right place, when there's a sense of calmness."

#### Working with clients

May strongly believes that her personal experience and understanding of herself allows her to be a more effective therapist. She has found it a very natural kind of process, of getting to understand myself through the contact of other women, it's kind of a back and forth sort of thing, as I know more about me I'm able to ask them more questions about them, and to understand what they're struggling with more.

May approaches the work of therapy in the same way she approaches her internal struggle to maintain awareness, that is, with an active, focused agenda. She refers to clients coming to therapy "to explore" and that she wants to be sure that she is "getting out of the way so they can do whatever it is they need to do." May believes that exercising the upper body is particularly beneficial for reconnecting with self. She interpreted a client's actions as verification of such a belief; one of her clients had told May of feeling very angry and venting this anger by cleaning her kitchen cupboards.

Consistent with her personal beliefs concerning the detrimental role

conditioning has played in her life, May believes that conditioning has a role to play in her treatment of women who are “borderline”. She states that “if ...being borderline is something that has been conditioned by their environment and influences them, then learning to be another way can also be learned through the process of therapy.”

When asked what she imagines her clients feel about their dissociative tendencies May replied that “the women with whom I’ve worked are, tend to be very critical of themselves and the way they handle themselves ...” In speaking of her own history with criticism May revealed that her father had been very critical, saying to her “think what you’re doing May, use your head.” During the second interview she realized that “in a funny way what I’m trying to do with my practice [spiritual] is the same thing.” That is, to pay attention and be self-aware.

#### Further Reflections on the Inherent Correspondence Between the Participants’ Self-Relations and Their Therapeutic Interventions

The topic of self-relations offers many contradictions and paradoxes as a research focus. The participants were intimately familiar with their own self-relations yet were often inarticulate when describing this aspect of their internal world. Their understanding of their self-relations was, on one hand, relatively stable from one interview to the next, yet on the other hand, through the process of struggling to find appropriate language their

self-understanding shifted and at times markedly changed.

As an interviewer, I positioned myself on their playing field, meaning that it was necessary for me to temporarily accept any realities they presented as objective “truths”, to gain as much information as possible concerning the topic at hand. Challenging any participant on their beliefs would have been counterproductive and disrespectful of our relationship. However, once freed to view their words at a distance, such objective realities dissolved into subjective apprehensions of internal and external experiences. These apprehensions were remarkably consistent within the self-relations of each participant.

I realized that as a researcher I had the advantage of stepping outside my participant’s world and then commenting on the inevitable biases that the analysis revealed. The participants presented some beliefs as “universal truths” and held that certain dynamics of self-relations were evidenced by their clients. The inherent correspondence between the participants’ self-relations and their therapeutic interventions was apparently embedded to the degree that they were unaware of it. Unless an attitude or belief system is consciously acknowledged, the tendency is for that self-information to become a part of the sense-making backdrop of day-to-day life, unnoticed until some process highlights its presence.

The participants displayed a great deal of self-knowledge and a

willingness to be vulnerable and perhaps unflatteringly honest about themselves during the interviews yet none of the participants noticed the similarities between descriptions of their self-relations and that of their clients.

Such embeddedness is an understandable and often necessary quality for therapists to maintain. Embeddedness can allow for a clear theoretical stance and thus lend a supportive framework to the therapeutic relationship. Being well grounded in one's own beliefs and understandings of therapeutic change will enrich and provide a consistency in the therapist's approach. However, being as aware as possible of their assumptions and judgements is important and necessary for therapists. As well, therapists should know what client issues are more likely to trigger countertransference<sup>7</sup>. Such awareness assists the therapist in distinguishing between what is an empathic understanding of the client's meaning and what is the therapist's own feeling. "Informed embeddedness" therefore involves having a clear self-understanding and theoretical accounting for the process of change and an ability to acknowledge the unique life-world of the client.

Another aspect of the participants "embeddedness" is an apparent

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Countertransference can be understood to be a therapist's cognitive-emotional reaction to his or her client based on associations with past issues triggered in the session by evocative material presented by the client.

tendency for “the characteristic use of metaphorical imagery” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 85). Coffey and Atkinson (1996) understand figurative use of language to be an “*ubiquitous* [emphasis added] feature of a culture’s or an individual’s thinking and discourse” (p. 85). According to the results of this study the use of a particular form of figurative language constitutes an individual’s perceptions and understandings of self and others, and serves as a framework from which the individual views the world. Important therapeutic considerations arising from this conceptualization of figurative speech will be discussed in the section “Implications for Practice”.

#### Describing Self-Relations

The following section will examine commonalities and differences between the participants. When exploring a subject area as individually unique as self-relations I believe that acknowledging difference is vital, as well as noting similarities.

The participants closely resembled each other in the consistency they demonstrated by utilizing a particular style of expression throughout the discussions. They greatly differed however, in their experience of self-relations. The meaning they attributed to concepts, such as “core self” and “parts”, and their understanding of the manner in which such concepts were structured remained unique.

## The Meaning Ascribed to the Language of Self-Relations

### May

May found the word “part” did not fit for her. In the re-interview when we were looking at a particular section of the interview map from the first interview she commented that “I seem to remember that when I talked sometimes I would use the word ‘part’ and then it would jar even as I heard myself say it, and then I was correcting myself a few times on that ...” Working as a therapist May tends to

use ‘parts’ when I’m talking to women who are really dissociative, and so my construct around ‘parts’ is that they’re quite discrete, and so using the word ‘parts’ sounds like it’s too separate, because there is much more of a flow ...

Once May began to describe her self-relations avoiding using the word “part” was difficult. She explained that “I’m a meditator and so for about 20 years I’ve been aware that there is a ‘watcher’, and here I’m going to use the word ‘part’ ...” Dissatisfied with her choice of words she paused and then continued “there’s an aspect that watches almost all the time, everything, and I visualize it kind of being above and behind my head, or there’s that awareness of that, if I conceptualize it as that.” The watcher aspect is

not free of affect but perhaps liberated from affect, not bound by affect,

that aspect of me will remind me or draw my attention, something about what I am doing or saying, in a kind of guiding way, and I just call that the 'watcher' and the watcher is almost always there ...

When she began meditating May found that "I became much more aware that that part of me [the watcher] was there ..." She realized that "the watcher part or aspect of me has always been there." She recalled having a fight with her mother when she was ten or eleven "and it was notable because I didn't usually fight with her ...I can remember in my head, saying, 'What are you doing, this is your mother, for Pete's sake!'" She called this voice "a kind of a commentary, the override, from the watcher."

May went on to describe how meditation changes her awareness of her self-relations, it's "as if there's no other dimension, the awareness shifts from a thinking to a sensing, and there's no watching then." When I asked her who she was at this point, she replied that "I'm not there at all ...I'm pretty much out of there ...it's like whatever conditioned package May is, or has become over 46 years, is less there."

Conditioning is a defining concept in May's self-relations. In her family of origin she was "taught as a child to be nice and polite and put people at their ease, and to ignore the way it feels to me." She recognizes that she continues to be affected by these rules, "the conditioning is not pay

attention to my own reactions and to not value them as much as the external or putting people at their ease ...”

May also identifies with having an “aware, unconditioned part of me, being more in touch with what’s right for this being.” She believes she has always had this part and that “the conditioning dulled the awareness of, dulled the connection with the aware aspect, part of me, but that’s being retrieved ...” As we discussed these distinctions in her internal experience she said, “I’m beginning to sense that it’s almost like there’s two Mays, in a way, there’s conditioned May and the aware May, that draws far too thick a line but that’s coming out as we talk.”

Further distinctions in her self-relations developed as we discussed her sense of having a “spontaneous aspect”. Initially she identified this as a single aspect but as she elaborated on this theme, what emerged was that “there’s three kinds of spontaneity, there’s the social one, there’s the one with my partner, and then there’s the one when I’m on my own.” She formulated that in social settings the “engaging spontaneity is a dimension of being with other people ...whereas with my partner spontaneity is not being watched as much, it’s just [pause], this is subtle stuff, how can you watch spontaneity?” Ultimately she decided that the context determined the manner in which she behaved spontaneously.

### Abbott

Abbott differed from May in his choice of language and associated meanings around the notion of having components of the self. When I was attempting to understand Abbott's sense of having parts I asked him if words other than "part" could be used to describe his self-relations, he responded, "I just like parts, I just like parts. That's the way it feels to me." He associated context with what part might be expressed, for example, at a party he might be "very playful and extroverted and interactive ..." Whereas at home he might "just like to be inside myself, very quiet ...bit of a bear that way ..."

Abbott identified many specific parts and the manner in which they related with each other. His experience is that

some of the parts collude with some of the parts ...I have a part of me, I'm a real dreamer, I'm always conceptualizing things ...that part has an ally that was given the name 'the bulldozer' because if anybody tried to mess with that dream this other part would come out and bulldoze over ...

Some relationships between his parts are not as cooperative as the relationship just described. He recounted how different parts could have different purposes that could conflict. He characterized his playful part as feeling sad if he had not been attending to it and how another part of

himself

that I would call the 'doer', very task-oriented, 'Well you should never be sad.' Very heavy and cognitive, life is not all play and all that shit, the part would actually be in conflict. Probably wouldn't even be in conflict with the playful part, just kinda, hide out ...

Continuing to outline the various parts of his self-relations

Abbott said

I don't have names for all of them ...I have a romantic part, I have a sexual part, I have a playful part, I have a really big playful part it's important to me, I have a very competitive part, comes out in different ways ... I probably missed a hundred, I have that many.

Abbott practices meditation, but unlike May's experience of a "not-self" when she is meditating, Abbott connects with his "authentic self" which he describes as "the real me, that's all there is, it's like the core of my being ...". He greatly values staying "in touch with my core", which he associates with "being real". In order to "come from that place as much as possible" Abbott will work on "getting still and quiet inside". He finds that there are times when "being in touch with myself is not about deep, spiritual, meditative place ...it's about being wacky and kooky and just really open".

When asked how he knows when he is in his core self, Abbott replied, "How do I know when I'm in my core? That's a good question. I just know.

That's how I know." Prompted to say more, Abbott continued with

I know when I'm there, like it's kind of a no bullshit place, this is a real place, um, and it seems like too, it's just a very quiet, serene place and I know I'm connected, really truly connected to myself.

Abbott described another part of his self-relations as "my gut" which is also "my intuition, my self, wisdom". Upon further exploration a distinction emerged between gut and wisdom, "sometimes I have a hunch and that might be my intuition". The hunch would then be "checked out" by his gut. Abbott believes "that all of these parts are part of my authentic self." He elaborated saying, "Like I don't see them, although I identify them as separate parts I think they all do a dance together."

### Peeta

In contrast to Abbott, Peeta identifies "parts" and "patterns" which are components of her internal world yet she does not identify with all of them as being "part of myself". Peeta's struggle with what she terms "dysfunctional patterns" was outlined in the previous section. This section will deal with what Peeta refers to as "core self".

Peeta has developed, with the help of therapists over the years, a manner in which to

see myself ...this has not always been true, but myself now I have an adult self, who is really functional and really perceptive and makes

really good decisions and is quite decisive and knows how to operate in the world. And then there's a child self that is much more emotional and spontaneous and rebellious and ... but it's still a part of my core self, it's quite a nice part of myself ...there's a part of my core self that's really intellectual that ...doesn't relate to the outside world that much and spends a lot of time just thinking about ideas and concepts ...

Peeta described these parts of her core self early in the first interview and said "those are the three main parts I can think of right now". Later in the interview I noticed as she recounted an internal conversation that she used the words "let's". As we explored what parts were involved in the "let us" she said, "there's a part of me that I forgot about [laughs] when I was talking before and it's the nurturing part of me ...this is a relatively new part that I probably developed over the past, I'd say, six years."

During the two interviews Peeta provided greater detail about her core parts. Her child part she described as having "different sub-parts like of different ages and stuff like that, like sometimes part of that sub-part is, it's four to six year old, some of it's a teenager but it's all mainly the same self with little sub-parts." She characterized another sub-part as

'the voice' ...the reason I call it 'the voice' is because I have a particular way of speaking when I'm in that role and it's the part of me that goes to government meetings ...it's my official voice, right? And it does feel

like a little tiny sliver part of me that I don't function from very often but that is really necessary in that kind of situation. It's a part of me that is quite smooth and controlled and my spontaneity gets drawn in ... everything is more regulated and I'm more conscious of every word I say.

Peeta contrasted this controlled part of herself with her self "at home or with friends, or whatever, I can be really loose and really spontaneous and crazy ... and I know that it's not appropriate to do that in those settings so I just leave that part of myself hidden ..."

Core self for Peeta includes more than just component parts. She has a strong identification with feelings she had as a young child that represent what the experience of being in her core self is. This experience entails memories of "having that feeling of strength and power" as a child. She remembers that

when I was a child I was quite, in spite of my level of dysfunction in my family, I was quite a powerful child, I was a real achiever and I was very artistic and I was sort of socially dominant in the sense of other kids would follow me ... so I had sort of a graced childhood in many ways that built a platform that I was able to sort of refer back to later

Peeta's memories of this time in her childhood contribute to her sense

of being in her core self now as an adult. She attributes her faith in her core self to her experiences as a child, “I think I knew about this core self because I remembered it. I just simply remember it from when I was a child and I just believe that hadn’t been destroyed.”

She describes this sense as “when I’m in touch with my core self and I’m centered in that self ...whatever I’m showing to the outside world, right, in terms of feeling, thought, behaviors, whatever, is the same as what’s happened on the inside.”

### Amber

The notion that context determines which aspect of self is prevalent was echoed by Amber. She finds that “different aspects of myself that are my multiple selves ...kind of ebb and flow and are available in different contexts.” Amber identifies a variety of parts within her internal world including

the caretaker part, the nurse Nightingale, out to rescue and help ... I have a pig-headed part, which is fairly new. I think my give-it-up part, I don’t matter and you matter, and your opinion and your expectations matter more than my needs ... would have been alive and thriving for most of my life.

Similar to May, Amber values her growing ability to pay attention to her own needs rather than focusing on the perceived needs of other’s. She

describes her self-relations as including “this committee I can have a discussion with, and then arrive at a way of doing something that is in the best interest of my being, rather than in the best interest of someone else’s being.”

Despite her sense of having a variety of parts, Amber does not “see the differentiation in self” implied by, for example, having “a professional and personal self ...because I didn’t feel like my self changed ...my behavior would look different, but I really don’t think I take a different self in there.”

To make her meaning clearer Amber provided the following image:

one picture I have that I sometimes use with clients, is like a circle and crossed over many times, like slices of pie, for example, and some of the parts or characters or qualities of aspects of me are larger or more frequently out there than other parts, but at the very centre where all the pieces cross over and meet in the centre, that would be the self. So the self for me, my self, is all of those parts, but it may not be that I am all of those parts at the same time, but I’m always me.

Amber referred to “the centre of the pie” as her “authentic core”, which she described as “an energy source ...a lot of light in that place, it’s vibrant, it’s also fairly steady, it doesn’t waver or fluctuate very much.” This sense of “light and energy” was experienced by Amber as having a physical

location in her body. She delineated two locations: “I’ll sometimes say the centre of myself and then I feel like it’s more solar plexus and at other times, I’ll feel like it’s lower than that, almost deeper than that.” Upon further reflection she determined that

the higher place feels more universal ...I can connect with others from there or that I’m a part of a bigger picture from that place ...and the other one is more private I think, more about just me and my life force and what keeps my soul alive.

Amber experiences this “central part” as “a place inside that knows, that’s wise, that’s centred, that’s grounded ...” This part knows “not all things in terms of content, but it’s a knowing place.”

#### Positioning Feelings in Self-Relations

The participants varied a good deal in their accounting of the role of emotions. When I asked Abbott if each of his parts had feelings he responded,

Yeah, that ‘s a good question. I would think, yeah. When I think about that my intuition says sure they do ...I don’t know if ...each part would have a whole range of feelings, maybe there’s more of a certain feeling attached to a different part.

To come to decisions when different parts have different needs, as for example when he has “got two hours of paper work to do ...and one of my

kids phones me up and says, 'Gee, Dad can we go and do batting practice?' Abbott relies on an internal system of "balances and checks and pros and cons". The different parts and their accompanying feelings and "beliefs and values" are sorted out in this manner.

As well as the parts having feelings Abbott believes that "emotions are interconnected ...there's this thread that runs through [experiences]", therefore feelings can "bubble up" when something happens that is similar to past "unresolved issues". Abbott called such feelings "historical memories".

According to Amber's sense of self-relations the core self is somewhat separate from her feelings. She perceives the core self as

not related only to my emotional experience and my belief system and my thinking parts, those I see as kind of doings, where self is more about being ...that's all a part of myself, my thinking and my feelings, but to me there's a quieter place that just is, that I would call self.

Faced with a situation in which she is of "two minds" Amber will "go inside and be in touch with what's inside". She not only thinks about her decision she will "just be with whatever's there and then I know, it's like a knowing place."

Peeta, in contrast to Amber, conceptualizes her feelings as strictly part of the core self. The other aspects of her self-relations, the dysfunctional

patterns discussed previously, simply “pick up the feelings from the core self”. These patterns will be “feeding off the core self and using the energy to fuel their own behavior, the behaviors of that part of the self”. She characterizes the dysfunctional patterns as “sponging off the core self”.

Peeta does not experience much in the way of conflict between feelings within her core self, she feels “pretty integrated and solid about my sense of values”. She recalled a time when a difficult choice had to be made and described her process that involved her “nurturer and adult” getting together and deciding what would be best for her.

May values her feelings as “vital, they’re like flags and posts that need to be decoded”. Her orientation to her feelings is that no matter what activity she has engaged in, for example “a session with a client or a conversation with a friend ... I still at the end of each of those, need to do something with myself as a next step as far as my feelings go.” The next step involves “a processing that goes on ...being aware of what happened, how the other person felt, and what she said, how she behaved, her energy level, and my response to that, and what I need to do for myself ultimately.”

To achieve her overall goal of feeling “centered and round”, as discussed in previous sections, May strives to gain “a sense of calmness” that feelings can “skew”. Accordingly she utilizes exercise, contemplation,

and meditation to explore and work through her feelings until she finds “a place where words become organized and settled ...and then I know it’s the right place, when there’s a sense of calmness.”

### Using “You”

Each participant was asked about her or his internal language; specifically if they used “you”, “we”, “I”, or something else when they spoke to themselves in their minds. To help access this knowledge I would suggest they imagine what they say to themselves if they are on the couch and need to get up to do something, are they saying, “I need to get up”?, “you need to get up”?, etc. The participants could identify using different words under different circumstances, e.g., Amber and Peeta would refer internally to themselves as “we” when their parts were cooperating in some manner. Peeta, Amber and Abbott identified using an internal “you” when criticizing themselves. “You” was also used by the nurturing part of Peeta, e.g., asking internally, “What do you need?”

May decided during the first interview that she either didn’t refer within herself to herself with any identifier, or she used “I”. In the second interview she related that she had been paying attention to her internal language and if she referred to herself internally at all (most often she did not) she would use “I”. Her use of “I” was usually to emphasize a need to pay attention to herself, e.g., “What do *I* want?”

When Abbott was first asked about his internal language he ventured that he would use “I” or not use anything at all. With further discussion it became apparent that Abbott did use “you” in his internal language, particularly when being critical of himself. Abbott did not comment on his use of “you” when describing his internal dialogue, as in when he said “...if I’m having this internal dialogue with myself that says, ‘Well, you made this promise to yourself that you were only going to work four days a week ...’”

#### Further reflections on using “you”

The use of “you” has important implications in therapy. Many therapists will draw attention to a client’s use of “you” when referring to himself or herself, e.g., when a client makes statements such as, “She makes you feel guilty when you don’t phone her”. Often therapists will encourage a client to say “I”, thereby encouraging the person to “own” the feeling being referred to. Abbott expressed that he was very conscious of the implications of using “you” when referring to himself, and he believed himself to be very attuned to this common mode of expression. He understood the use of “you” to be “an externalization”, “a way of separating one’s behavior from themselves”, and he believed that he was very careful about his own use of “you”. It is instructive to note that despite Abbott’s well-defined values and beliefs and the best of intentions, he apparently

didn't notice when his verbal behavior contradicted his values.

A further inconsistency underlay a pattern of speech some participants displayed in the interviews. For example, despite a professed desire to "own" his experience, Abbott at times spoke in terms of how *people* behaved and felt when I asked how *he* behaved or felt in certain circumstances. He made comments such as, "it's pretty common when you're doing something for a long time you might experience boredom ...". This speech habit of generalizing experience is another use of "you"; that is, the use of "you" acts in a sentence to normalize and appeal to the existence of an universal way of feeling, believing, or behaving. It is possible that Abbott spoke in such a manner to retain some privacy within our exploration of his self-relations [see Limitations for discussion].

Subsequent to my ears becoming attuned to the externalizing purpose of "you" and the normalizing purpose of "you", it has been difficult not to notice how often "you" is employed in general, as a kind of permission to feel, believe, or behave in a certain manner. A curious aspect of this is that most often "you" does not cover general experience, since individuals have idiosyncratic reactions to all aspects of their lives.

The participants' genuine desire to be "all that I can be" reflects a similar conception of self as what is inherent in the use of "you" both internally and externally. Apparently only certain parts of the self are

acknowledged as such, and these parts are often compared with an ideal or a generalized conception of appropriate “selfness”. The other parts, such as Peeta’s dysfunctional patterns, are separated from the acceptable parts in some manner.

The next theme continues the illumination of the participants’ tendencies to accept and promote parts of themselves, and relegate other parts to a “not-me” status.

#### Wanting To Be the Same on the Outside as On the Inside

The participants shared a strong desire for congruency. They wanted “the outside to be like the inside”, this also involved taking care of themselves and putting themselves first to a certain extent. They valued spontaneity, which corresponded with being congruent; if one can behave spontaneously then one is likely “being the same on the outside as the inside”.

They seemed to have a need to have internal congruency as well and in attempting to have that sense they would differentiate aspects of their self-relations as “not-self”. The participants differed from each other in how they accomplished this. May differentiated two distinct internal experiences, one was of her soul and the other was “May”. May was further differentiated between conditioned and aware, the conditioned May was an aspect to which she strove to bring more “awareness”.

Abbott indicated, through his choice of language, that he had strong beliefs around “how people should be” and he expected these things of himself - he made several statements concerning certain of his behaviors as “not being me”. As previously discussed, when pressed to account for who was responsible for his actions then he said it was a part of him he didn’t much like.

Amber accepted all the parts of herself yet there is a part of her she calls the black place and this part is a very frightening and painful place to be and she strives not to be in this part at all.

Peeta’s belief system differentiates her selves from problematic behaviors and reactions and she stated that these troubling aspects of her self-relations are “not me”, they are patterns that attach to the authentic self and are not the person.

The participants shared a sense of striving to be a better self according to what each believed would comprise this better self. They felt they could be “more of who I really am”, this was to be made possible by paying attention to what was going on inside and matching that with external behavior. Having time for self-contemplation was essential. A well-developed sense of knowing “what is right for me” was evidenced by all the participants and they were firm in their trust of this sense.

They felt embarrassment and frustration over the times when they did

not behave according to their deeply held beliefs. Peeta and Abbott revealed dismay when discussing particular episodes during which they had behaved contrary to their beliefs. May and Amber felt a sense of duty to do what was right for them rather than putting others first, and they also expressed consternation about the times they behaved contrary to this belief.

Further reflections on wanting to be the same on the outside as on the inside

The tendency to promote some aspects of the self as “me” and relegate other parts to a “not-me” status is evident in the last two themes. “You” language was used by some participants to criticize certain parts of themselves, and in turn the part that uses “you” was decreed as “not-self”, rather the critic part is conceptualized as the result of internalized messages received as a child from caregivers.

The desire for congruency also reflects a process of selection, with some parts included and others excluded from the idealized “me”. If the participants simply wanted to be “the same on the outside as the inside” then all aspects of their self-relations would be represented in their behavior. This is not my sense of what the participants meant when they spoke of their self-expectations.

Peeta believes that what she decides is best for her is best for

everyone, and therefore if she takes care of herself her behavior falls into the category of belonging to her core self. When she behaves in a way that she finds painful (e.g., when triggered by a perceived threat and she becomes hostile) then that behavior falls into the category of belonging to her dysfunctional patterns that are “not-me”. Her goal is to “not go into pattern” and therefore her behavior will be in response to what she believes is best for her and not due to being in reaction to a perceived threat.

Abbott clearly has parts of himself that he considers to be “not-me”. Several times in the interviews he referred to “the real me” versus a behavior he was engaging in that he did not approve of, e.g., being authoritarian with his children. He divides his behavior between feeling “connected” or “disconnected”. He has developed several measures that concern developing an awareness of when he is “disconnected” and then working toward becoming “reconnected” [see “Correspondence” theme for discussion]. His goal is to always be “connected” and therefore his behavior will match his expectations of this idealized self.

May also firmly divides the aspects of herself into what is acceptable to herself and what is not. The “conditioned” part of her is something she strives to overcome. She approves of her “aware” and spontaneous aspects and respects the part of her she calls “the watcher”. She further divides

her experience into being in a state of “not-me”, as in when she is meditating, and being “May”. We spent a good deal of the interviews discussing the reciprocal relationship between her “soul” and “May”. My understanding is that she needs both to do the “work” that both do, what remained unclear is how the work was divided since the “soul” is both unchanging and changeable. Her goal is to bring as much awareness as possible to every moment she occupies, and it is the “conditioned May” that interferes at times with the awareness she wants to maintain.

Amber differed from the other participants in that she accepted all aspects of herself and did not attribute any of her behavior to a “not-me” part. She did however, experience a dichotomous sense of self-relations at another level of conceptualizing. For Amber, her assurance of a “right to be alive” was dependent on whether she viewed her self from “the black place” or from “the light place”. She strives to retain the perspective of knowing her worth, and for the most part does see herself from this supportive place. When she is faced with a perceived threat and her coping mechanism of splitting fails, then she is thrust into the “black place” and accordingly doubts her very right to life.

Each participant referred to the qualitative difference in the experience of being congruent compared with when their behavior was other than how they would have it. The felt experience of being congruent

reinforced their sense of how they should be. Being in touch with their core self, or soul, or whatever term matched their sense, experientially “feels right”. Their sense of “knowing” that arises from this kind of inner connection, compellingly informs them of how they “should” be at all times [see Implications for discussion of “knowing”].

One last theme remains and it combines deeply personal experiences of self-relations with the professional lives of the participants.

#### Understanding of Dissociative Processes

One criterion for a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder [BPD] is that of dissociative episodes [see Literature Review]. Following the logic that it can be illuminating to study something when it is not working properly to understand how it operates when it is functional, participants for this study were selected who would have experience working with self-relations when they are problematic. This selection criterion was intended to provide insight into the particular behavior of dissociating, and thereby more generally inform the study about self-relations.

The four participants stated similar understandings of dissociative behavior, and shared a sense of uncomfortableness around applying a psychiatric diagnostic label to an individual. It became apparent however, when a closer examination of their understanding was undertaken, that their conceptions of the dynamics of dissociation were quite different.

Peeta's caseload includes clients who have been diagnosed with BPD. Therefore, she is "familiar with that diagnosis ... I read the DSM IV". She works with a "client's sense of self and parts of self" and does not "think about it in terms of the DSM IV". She understands dissociation to occur "where you do split off parts of your self, like split off your emotional self and your rational self, or you split off your sense in your body from your feelings ..."

In terms of self-relations Peeta draws a distinction between dissociating and "going into pattern". According to her own sense of self-relations, and therefore the way in which she understands the internal dynamics of her clients, the core self (comprising parts, such as adult, child, nurturer) can be overtaken by a dysfunctional pattern or it can be split into disconnected parts. She describes this conceptualization in the following manner

...these aberrant patterns, right, a lot of them take over the person and they kind of run you like a puppet ...you're on automatic, you're an automaton, you're being driven by feelings that are out of control ...but with dissociation, dissociating is kind of like a pattern in itself, but it's a little bit different than most patterns, it's a clever pattern because what it does, it goes in there and instead of running the person like a puppet, it just cuts them up ...just splits them into different parts so

that they're not connected anymore ...

Amber's understanding of her clients "that aren't technically diagnosed [with BPD] but that's my impression that they meet some of the criteria, is that they don't oftentimes have access to many of their parts", is similar to Peeta's comprehension. However they have a very different understanding of the dynamics involved in this aspect of self-relations [see p. 170 for diagram depicting Peeta's and Amber's process of splitting]

The lack of access to other parts of the self is central in Amber's understanding of her client's and her own dissociative episodes, otherwise called "splitting". Her conceptualization of this process entails a metaphor of a flower with a centre and surrounding petals. The centre of the flower is the "authentic core" and the petals are all the different selves, between the spaces of the petal is "the black place" which is a terrifying abyss. Amber describes splitting to be "a leap from a centred place out into a place that didn't have fear, or that didn't experience feeling ..." The "black place" is experienced when "the coping [splitting] hasn't worked and I can't get back to the self". Amber conceptualizes that her self is like a flower with the parts being petals and the centre being the core. Dissociation involves a part splitting off under threat and being out of communication with the rest. She also has a "black place" that she will fall into if she can not split successfully. The splitting is relatively tolerable, it is the black

place that is very painful and terrifying.

Abbott feels “very uncomfortable” describing a person with a label (e.g., BPD), however he did find that using these terms was “really useful for purposes of communication” with other professionals. He understands dissociation to be a coping mechanism people develop from having experiences so that it’s “not been safe in some way to be inside themselves”.

He sees his role as therapist to be one of helping people “to get to know themselves and understand what they need and have the kind of lifestyle they want.” As for self-relations he believes that all individuals have an authentic, core self and surrounding parts. Dissociation is a “fragmentation of a person’s self”. Abbott believes that “one way of getting away from painful experiences is to split off, dissociate, kind of protecting our psyche but we leave our body behind”.

A “sizeable portion” of May’s practice is with “women who are pretty dissociative”. Dissociation according to May is due to experiencing trauma that has “encouraged them to separate from the affect and from the experience as much as they possibly can, in order to tolerate it.” In terms of the dynamics of self-relations May conceptualizes a self that comprises various aspects of conditioning and other aspects that are “aware”, and at the core of the self is a “not-self” that she calls a “soul”.

### Further reflections on understanding of dissociative processes

What of the self-relations of individuals who meet the criteria for borderline personality disorder? If their very structure, shaped by the traumas they experienced at an early age (Berelowitz & Tarnopolsky, 1993; Briere, 1992; Gold & Stricker, 1993; Perry & Herman, 1993; Reiker & Carmen, 1986; Zivney, Nash & Hulsey, 1988), prevents an integration of various self-aspects, are they destined to experience the instability and impulsivity that are the hallmarks of this disorder? If therapeutic interventions offer the possibility of achieving a more integrated sense of self what approach would be consistent with the findings of this study? Rather than studying the actual interventions the participants reported using in their practices, which after all stem directly from their own experience of self-relations, I chose to reflect on how two participants described their experiences of dissociative states.

Amber and Peeta both discussed their tendency to split or dissociate when the affect of a situation grew too intense or had persisted beyond their tolerance. They described the splitting as being in a part of themselves that did not experience pain, they felt “numb”. As I understand it this splitting begins at a very early age when the developing self cannot tolerate unpredictable and traumatic caretaking. How Peeta and Amber managed the effects of such caretaking is detailed in the foregoing

explication of themes.

In summary, it may be the cognitive creation of an alternative self-structure that has given these individuals a relatively stable sense of self. The creation of this alternative, achieved through psychotherapy and self-direction, speaks to the possibility of helping individuals with disruptive self-relations in the development of a more integrated self. The creation of this alternative self-structure was not without its problems for Amber and Peeta. Both experienced times when a perceived threat (on any level) could trigger their old pattern of dissociating [see *Two Depictions of the Process of Splitting*, p. 170]. They relied on the support and help of others to reestablish more integrated self-relations [see *Implications for Counsellors for further discussion*].

Before moving on to the Implications section one last area remains to be covered: An accounting for the credibility of this study is an important piece in the overall picture that is being provided to the reader. The placing in this dissertation of the following section on credibility was determined according to what information should precede its reading. It is at this point in the dissertation that the reader has the pertinent knowledge of the study required to appreciate the various aspects of the credibility of the study presented.

### Credibility

Any genuine attempt to gain knowledge is grounded in the self-awareness of the seeker. Throughout the process of formulating, refining, and implementing this research design strict attention has been paid to my assumptions, biases, and preconceptions. A research journal has been assiduously maintained and referred to ongoingly during the preparation of this dissertation.

The unexpected findings concerning the inherent correspondence between self-relations and therapeutic interventions naturally led to an examination of my own beliefs, core tendencies, type of figurative language, and their effect on my counselling style. I have scrutinized my processes as closely as those of the participants in order to empathize with and expand my knowledge of embeddedness.

To establish the veracity of my claim to self-knowledge, I will present a brief synopsis of my own self-relations and what I have learned about the nature of my embeddedness.

#### My selves and self-relations

During the process of analysing the data from our study on self (Arvay et al., 1995) it became increasingly obvious that my experience of being a self was markedly different from the others. Where they had commonalities, I did not. One of the more significant differences lay in the

metaphorical language my co-researchers utilized to describe their sense of something that linked their different “selves” or “parts” (language varied).

Although I had created a comprehensive map of my psychic territory I did not experience any sense of a unifying presence, e.g., the others used metaphors such as “a silver chord from which my selves are strung”, another described her inner experience “like a river bed over which my life flows”. I did not and do not experience my selves this way, the language I use is of having “distinct selves” and “not-so-distinct” selves and then there is a “pool” of characteristics.

One evening as we sat working in the cabin we had retreated to in order to explicate our themes and compose a journal article, a profoundly informative (although painful at the time) event happened. We became somewhat punchy while editing the day’s writing and began to ridicule each other’s work. I received and dispensed my share of this ridicule and was laughing along with the others when a threshold of tolerance was apparently breached and I split psychologically - the relevant aspect of splitting in this context is that I was cut off from mediating influences that would help me cope with intense feelings in a mature, integrated manner.

I did not at the time realize what had happened other than to feel hurt, and disconnected from the others. I became withdrawn (when we eventually discussed the event the others said they had assumed I was

tired) and felt emotionally regressed to the level of an eight-year-old. I went to bed harbouring intense feelings of worthlessness, rage, and despair. When I woke in the morning I felt little better. After some time my silence was noted and I forced myself to speak of the hurt I felt. The others, all counsellors, were concerned and remorseful for any manner in which they may have contributed to the state I was in, and we debriefed the episode.

I was left with lingering feelings of shame and anger and discussed these with my therapist at the next opportunity. She used the expression splitting to describe her understanding of what had occurred, as she had in previous sessions, and on this occasion I picked up on it. I encouraged her to inform me of her understanding in general about splitting, and her impressions of how I manifest this defensive psychological coping response.

From this conversation and others with my therapist and my own reflections and recollections, I have come to realize how profoundly entrenched this behavior of splitting is. I can now recall many times, particularly when I have felt stressed and unsupported, that I have split. The splitting is severely limiting in that a very small portion of all that I am is available to me and yet there is a profound conviction that nothing exists outside the current painful feeling state.

Moreover, it was so much a part of my way of being that despite years of introspection and therapy I had not “seen” this behavior. All I had been aware of is that from time to time I would “lose” myself and feel very young, vulnerable, disconnected, and in a great deal of psychic pain. I have used this new awareness to anticipate circumstances that might lead to splitting, and to implement coping strategies, e.g., seeking contact with supportive individuals when I am under stress. I have also passed this awareness on to my clients (in case-specific ways).

During this time I also made a very interesting connection between a personal theme that had emerged for me and the new information I had about my lifelong tendency to split when feeling stressed and unsupported. I named this theme “being context-dependent”. What I identified through analysis of the data and subsequent clarifying conversations, was that I experience very distinct selves according to the context I’m in. During a particular discussion, I labelled this tendency to change according to context as “unconscious recipes”. I had a sense that I could provide a “recipe” of whom I would be in differing contexts.

I noted that not all the qualities that “came out” were ones that I was necessarily familiar with, e.g., a distinct self I experience is as a group facilitator. When I am in this role one characteristic that surfaces is that of being relaxed and jocular. This is not a characteristic that I would use in

describing myself, yet consistently in groups it emerges and at the time I feel authentic.

This paradox of feeling fully myself while in a context and then not really recognizing that self when out of the context is referred to by Hermans (1992). He states that “the *I* had the possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The *I* fluctuates among different and even *opposed* [italics added] positions” (p. 28).

I have come to realize that there is a connection between the degree of “distinctness” I experience in challenging circumstances and the psychological defence of dissociation triggered when I feel overwhelmed. I believe that my self-relations developed and habituated with the response to stress called “splitting” and that Herman’s concept of the shifting “I” is toward the functional end of a spectrum containing both phenomena.

In the preparation of this dissertation I have had reason to recall my tendency toward being “context-dependent”. This endeavour has occupied my time and attention for several years and more recently it has almost exclusively monopolized my activities. As I type these words I am concluding a two-week “holiday” I have taken from my position as an alcohol and drug counsellor in an outpatient clinic. The timing was calculated to allow for the completion of a first draft by a certain date

without having to go to heroic measures.

Unfortunately, no sooner had I begun what was intended to be an intensely productive writing regime, when the hard drive on my computer “failed”. There was nothing to do but arrange for its repair. Endless complications peculiar to the unstable nature of computers followed; suffice it to say my stress level escalated as a series of complications interfered with my ability to focus on the task at hand.

Eventually I approximated the level of concentration I had foreseen as my goal, and a first draft of the dissertation is completed, more or less, at this time of writing. As my sense of pressure and stress diminishes, a realization has been gradually pushing itself into consciousness. That is, I have temporarily “lost” myself.

This is a feeling of “not being myself”, “not knowing who I am” or “not feeling like anything other than someone who is writing a dissertation”. I realize that again, due to stress and remaining over time in one context, that I have lost contact with other selves in my self-relations. I require exposure to the contexts wherein the selves emerge in order to stay connected with their existence. With such exposure I thereby “remember” my self (selves), otherwise the non-utilized selves lie dormant and forgotten.

The participants did not identify conceptualizations of their parts or

selves that sounded similar to my understanding of being “context-dependent”. However, there are echoes of such tendencies in Peeta’s and Amber’s descriptions of their dissociative behavior. Amber experiences her selves as petals of a flower with each being in communication with the others. When she is stressed or threatened on some level she will split off into one of the petals without having contact with the other selves. Peeta’s response to threats is to split off to a “dysfunctional pattern” which she frames as a “not-self”. In this state she feels like she is “not herself” and requires support to reconnect with her “core self”.

I am very confident in the findings of my analysis in part because of the lack of similarity between my experience of self-relations and the descriptions the participants provided. I do not experience any sense of a core self, yet each participant identified the experience of an essential central self, or as with May, a “not-self, the soul”. As well, the participants stated beliefs that their clients had an essential core aspect. Since I do not have this experience, or belief, I am confident that I did not lead them to disclose such constructs.

In addition, I was able to ask questions that encompassed the experience of having a sense of a core self that may not have occurred to someone embedded in that experience. I believe I have the advantage of seeing the “bigger picture”, as I do not have unrealized assumptions

around the universality of experiencing an “authentic self”. Conversely, I cannot ask informed questions about the experience of an authentic self.

The credibility of this study rests on my skills as a therapist and researcher. In my occupation it is essential that I am continuously engaged in a process of self-examination and awareness. I also regularly receive feedback and support from colleagues and supervisors. Furthermore, I can hone my skills on a day to day basis by simply noting the quality of the work I do. That is, the more carefully I listen, attend, and respond in a therapeutic manner (focusing on the client’s meaning and experience) the greater is my sense of being helpful. My experience of a sense of accomplishment after a session is consistently corroborated by my clients. Clients will comment that it was a “good session”, and they will give me feedback about what they learned in our time together.

As previously discussed, there is a dynamic relationship between style of figurative language, internal processing and therapeutic interventions [see explication of Correspondence theme]. This relationship both informs and embeds my work as a counsellor. The figurative language that I use to describe my self-relations, and my experience of self-relations, involves a process of accessing “impressions” (much like footprints in clay) and producing language that satisfactorily conveys how the impressions “feel”. I predominately interpret internal and external events through this

process, and it is in this manner that I apprehend the meaning of what my clients say.

When I choose to focus on any event, the more exclusively I focus the stronger an “impression” is formed in my sensing, which in turn allows for a more comprehensive verbal description of the “impression”. As a therapist I focus intently on my client by extinguishing distracting perceptions and thoughts that are not related to what is happening immediately in the session. It is the times that I maintain this level of focussing that I receive the most positive feedback from the client.

It is this quality of listening that I bring to my work as a researcher. I have completed the interview/analysis procedure for two research projects (Snell, 1992; Arvay et al., 1995) and feel comfortable and capable conducting this type of research. I also bring to this study the experience of being interviewed on the same subject matter that I interviewed my participants on - self-relations.

The feedback I received from the participants after they had read the preliminary analysis of the interviews, substantiated my sense that I had captured a good deal of the meaning they had striven so hard to impart. They confirmed that although I had organized the content of the interviews according to my own conceptualizations, I had fairly represented their understanding of their self-relations at the time of the

interviews. One participant has since engaged in a learning process around parts work, and she commented that she could *add* to what she had said, but would not change anything. Her understanding is simply richer now. Other comments that are consistent with the feedback I received include, “You got the essence”; “Impressed with how you brought it all together”; “It made sense”; “It’s well-written, accurate, and it rang true”. One participant commented that she very much appreciated that the painful processing that occurred in one of our interviews was very respectfully presented.

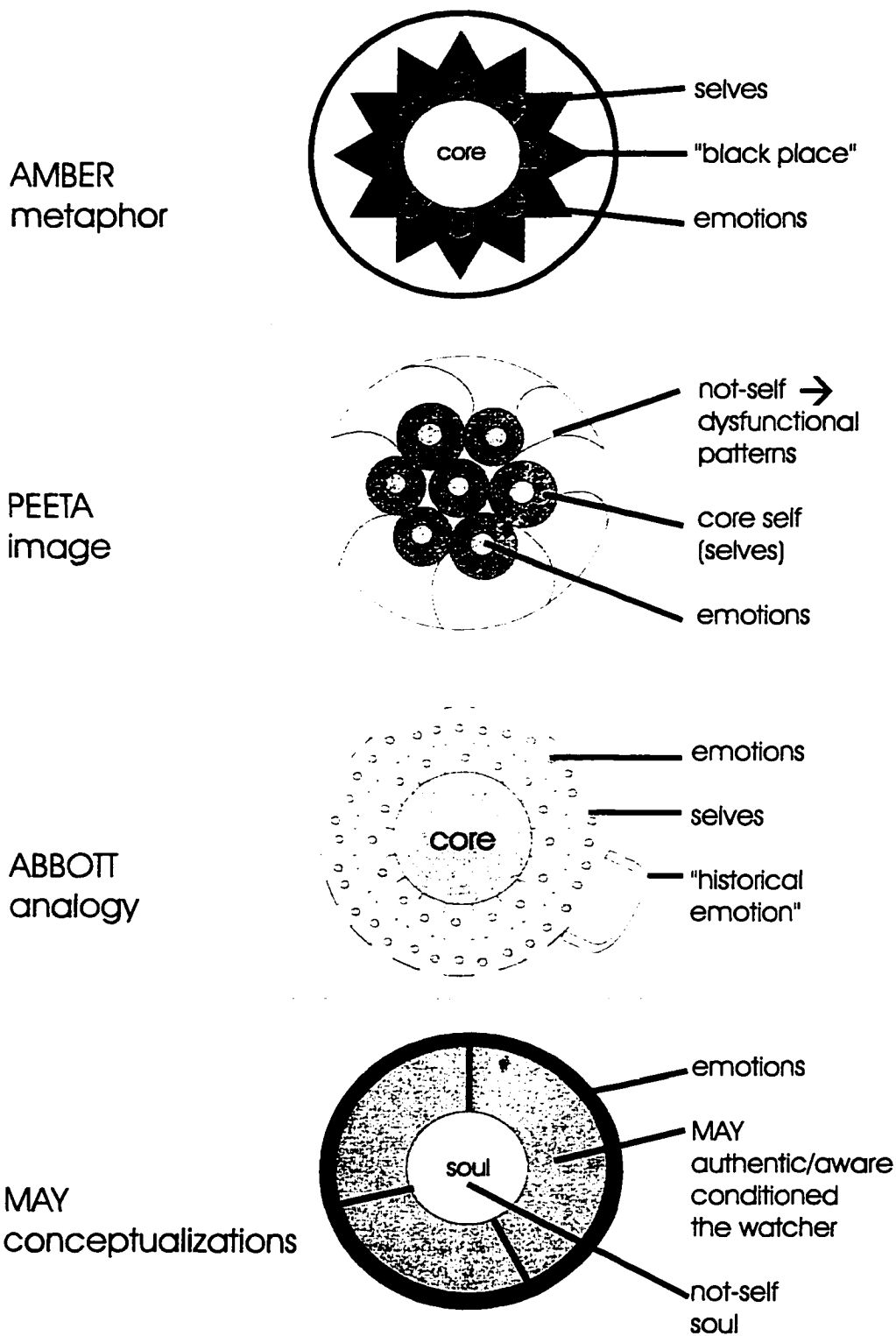
Many components comprise the credibility of a study: (a) I have provided a detailed accounting of what factors led to the development of the research question, (b) I have grounded the key components of the study in the literature, (c) the methodological considerations that govern this inquiry have been explicated, (d) a very detailed description of the interview and analysis process has been presented, (e) the participants’ feedback has been outlined, and (f) a thorough presentation of the themes and my subsequent reflections have been provided.

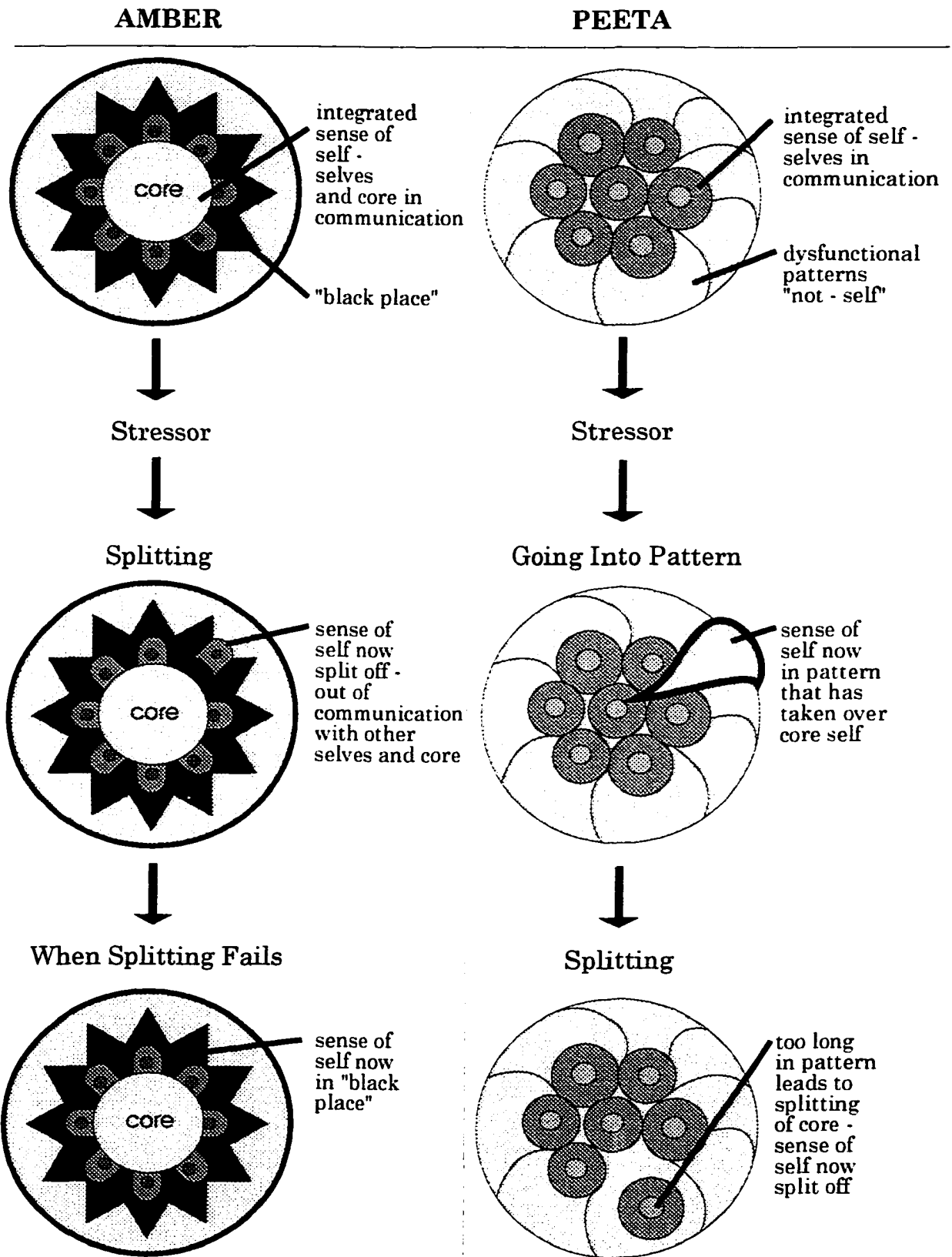
This degree of detail was provided to describe clearly “the method-creation process” (Chenail, 1996, Internet article). Chenail (1996) asserts that it is necessary and important for qualitative researchers to describe, explain, and interpret the methods used in the research process.

The diagram Pictorial Representations of Four Self-Relations (p. 169), concludes the presentation of the themes and reflections that emerged from the researcher's analysis of the data. This diagram was designed as an overview of each participant's description of her or his self-relations. It represents a distillation of the four participants' descriptions according to the organizing activity of my intellect.

It is also intended to allow for a comparison between participants and therefore prepares the reader for the following section on Implications, the content of which, in part, springboards from interpretations that arose from the concepts represented in the following diagram.

Figure One: Pictorial Representations of Four Self-Relations





## Implications

The circularity inherent in this study, or put another way, the unavoidable linking of one concept to another in endless loops that defy a causal beginning place, presented some difficulties in providing an orderly development of thought within this dissertation. Obviously, the research process was linear regarding events taking place one after the other. However, the underlying concepts and emerging themes were reminiscent of the “serpent swallowing its tail” analogy. One such aspect of this circularity will now be discussed.

Given that the most significant finding of this study describes the phenomenon of embeddedness, which includes the implication that our perceptions are inextricably linked with our perspective, what does that say about *any* finding that I present? Am I not just interpreting my participants’ words within an all-consuming framework of my own? Have I not simply argued for solipsism?

I would have to agree that my propensity for order and relatedness - I enjoy nothing more than tying notions up in neat, interconnected bundles - has allowed for the strong thematic connections noted within and between the participants’ interviews. Paradoxically, once that order was defined and detailed through the explication of themes, then it is as if it had always been there, waiting to be “discovered”.

The questions I believe to be relevant (despite how endlessly insightful ontological and epistemological debates can be, and yes, it is necessary to explicate my associated beliefs) are: What does the study mean? What use is it? How can individuals' lives be improved through this study? How do I justify the time and expense involved in producing this dissertation?

The unexpected finding concerning the role of embeddedness in the therapeutic relationship is an important contribution to our knowledge of therapeutic processes. Whether or not this aspect of self-relations (the correspondence between self-relations and understanding of self and others) "existed" before I interpreted the data, is a separate issue from the benefits of the study.

#### Implications for Practice

Essentially, all of the results of this inquiry pertain to counselling practice in that the principal finding concerned the inherent correspondence between an individual's self-understanding and that individual's understanding of others, despite a genuine and informed effort to guard against such assumptions. If this finding holds true for counsellors, other than the participants, then illuminating the manner in which self-relations influence therapeutic practice at this previously unrealized level of self-construction is necessary and important.

When the participants were contacted for feedback regarding the

preliminary analysis they had received, a common topic that was discussed pertained to their genuine desire to maintain a client-centered approach<sup>8</sup> as therapists. They were concerned that the implications from this study indicated they might be prompting clients as to the nature of their self-relations. They verbalized an intention to increase their mindfulness in this area.

I believe it would benefit all counsellors, whatever their expertise, to bring their experience of self-relations to a verbal level. If a therapist assumes (assumptions being, in part, beliefs that we are unaware of) his or her experience of a “core self” is a universal experience, then the clients of such a therapist may be given direct or indirect messages that they too have a core self that is defined according to the therapist’s experience. The diagram Pictorial Representations of Four Self-Relations (p. 169) demonstrates the unique differences in self-relations that exist between four people who are similar to each other, e.g., profession, race, class, education, therefore it is to be expected that there is a much broader range of difference between individuals of more varying backgrounds.

When a client has problematic self-relations it is appropriate for the therapist to suggest alternatives and assist in a reframing of self-

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A client-centered approach is defined by Raskin and Rogers (1989) as assuming: that clients can be trusted to select their own therapists, to choose the frequency and length of their therapy, to talk or be silent, to decide what needs to be explored, to achieve their own insights, and to be the architects of their own lives. (p. 156)

integration, however, there is a fine balance between offering health-promoting alternatives and superimposing the therapist's self-relations onto the client.

To guard against such an intervention, it is important for therapists to bring to awareness their underlying assumptions about self-relations. I have developed an exercise, *Describing the experience of "being a self"* [see Appendix A]; it is intended to raise self-awareness in this area. Not only does this exercise provide an opportunity to access the experience of self-relations on a verbal level, it also allows for a sensitization concerning the impact of such an exploration. The participants, and my colleagues and myself during our former research study (Arvay et al., 1995), found ourselves profoundly affected, to varying degrees, while describing our self-relations. This is a deeply personal area of self-exploration, all the more keenly felt when described to another person.

It is also my recommendation that counsellors offer to guide their clients in a description of their self-relations, given that the client has indicated a general interest in this area of self-knowledge. One participant has included such an exploration in her work with clients since she participated in this research study. She is very careful to acknowledge and support the "tender" nature of this type of personal work. Such carefulness derives from the sense of vulnerability and "realness" she felt arise from

the interview process. It is due to her feedback that I have included the caution that therapists need to be sensitive to the potentially profound nature of the experience of describing self-relations.

Gaining an understanding of self-relations and improving the quality of such relations can be of great benefit to some clients. Polster (1995) encourages the exploration of self-relations, as demonstrated in the following remarks:

In forty-five years of practice, I have seen how often the search for a sense of self has been one of the primary factors that motivates people to seek therapy. Underneath the symptoms that trouble them, patients have a widespread concern with the simple question of who they are.

In searching out the answer, rather than discovering one fundamental, unified, unchanging self, we uncover a number of different aspects - selves - that are often so much at odds with one another that they may seem to belong to several different people. (p. ix)

Before facilitating this process of self-discovery, I believe it is necessary and important to allow every client the opportunity to indicate a receptivity to the notion of a self-concept that implies multiple selves or parts. During an interview for this study, a participant prided herself that she “allowed” clients to name their own parts; I was struck by the participant’s assumption that clients necessarily accepted the concept of

“parts”. It is a point worth repeating that there is a delicate balance between offering a therapeutic alternative to a problematic self-structure and predetermining a client’s understanding of her or his self-relations.

A noteworthy comment was made by Kohut, who during the 1960s and 1970s developed the theory of self psychology (Langley, 1994), concerning the role his self played in his work as a therapist. Kohut (1977) stated that, “I have not been able to find indubitable evidence of the influence my own personality may have had on an analysand’s available choices” (p. 263). Perhaps given the opportunity to describe his self-relations he may have found such evidence.

#### Implications Regarding Dissociative Processes

The psychological coping response of splitting is undoubtedly a stress-producing behavior, despite the origin of this automatic defense mechanism as a stress-reducing behavior (Perry & Herman, 1993). It is important to note that when the participants were questioned as to their assumptions regarding their clients’ feelings about dissociative behavior, they each answered according to their own emotional reaction surrounding this behavior [see end of each section *Working with Clients* for specifics].

An important implication for counsellors that arises from this study concerns the therapeutic necessity to understand what a client may feel about her or his dissociative behavior. Therapists need to be on guard

against assuming the client feels as they do; an appreciation of the client's feelings will assist the therapist in tailoring client-centered interventions.

The results of this study also suggest that counsellors may rely on their conceptual understanding of dissociative practices rather than attempting to gain a specific understanding of their client's experience of splitting. The diagram, Two Depictions of the Process of Splitting, (p. 170), demonstrates marked differences in the actual *experience* of splitting. It is the qualitative difference between conceptualizing and experiencing that deeply informs this study overall, and in particular the process of dissociation.

It is my assumption that if two therapists with similar backgrounds and theoretical understandings have such differences in the dynamics of splitting within their self-relations, then it is likely that clients may vary widely in their experience of splitting. It is essential that therapists begin to develop interventions that depend on specific information they have gathered from their clients, rather than continue to treat individuals under the assumption of common self-relations. Auerbach (1985) contends that the components of a functional self include "being continuous with past selves, integrating current action tendencies, integrating and unifying diverse aspects of the self, and being positively valued" (p. 746).

As for treatment, he believes "that clinical work should consist, in part

at least, of focusing attention of the *specific* [italics added] processes of self-construction and self-maintenance, and what is problematic about them” (p. 746).

### Implications Regarding Figurative Language

Another implication that results from the identification of the manner in which a therapist’s self-relations can determine his or her understanding of a client, involves the use of figurative language. Each participant’s use of a specific figurative trope (e.g., metaphor, analogy, or imagery), was consistent throughout their descriptions of their self-relations. There was an inherent correspondence that was evident between the use of figurative language and the participant’s essential processing style, e.g., processing memories, processing client issues, or processing during the interviews.

Other counsellors may also have an individualistic processing style that predetermines their understanding and sense-making of themselves and clients. Choice of figurative language may be an accurate indicator of the nature of this style; accordingly, therapists could increase their self-awareness in this area. Scholnick and Cookson (1994) refer to figurative language as “image schemata”; they propose that “we are so accustomed to using our basic image schemata to interpret events, that we automatically map them onto new domains and extract the range of implications the

image schemata afford” (p. 114).

Understanding the influence of figurative language could also provide an opportunity to understand how a client’s use of figurative language predetermines his or her understanding. The interrelationship of therapist and client choices of figurative language could ascertain, at least in part, what might create a “good match” between therapist and client.

#### Implications Regarding Using “You”

There are interesting implications that arise from the exploration of “you” language in this study. All four participants reported using “you” in internal dialogue, often this usage was a result of being self-critical. A casual survey of colleagues and acquaintances revealed that many individuals use “you” in internal dialogue, particularly as a “critic” voice. It also may be the case that individuals are unaware of this tendency and that without a specific intention to note internal dialogue they assume that the predominant internal identifier is “I”.

Such an assumption is present in the literature as well. Morin (1995-96) examines the question of how self-talk mediates self-awareness. Within this article Morin refers to a variety of research and theory concerning self-talk and problem-solving; all of the reported self-talk uses “I”. According to the results of my research and the abovementioned informal gathering of information, it is likely that self-talk, particularly

regarding correcting performance, would sometimes involve the use of an internal “you”.

Another example of the unnoticed “you” in internal language is contained within an article on self-concept by Markus and Wurf (1986). In their exploration of how and when self-representations control behavior, the examples of self-talk provided, e.g., “I shouldn’t be eating this ice cream” (p. 328), rely solely on the use of “I” within internal dialogue. Again, I believe it is more accurate to depict such internal dialogue as using “you” within a ratio to the use of “I”.

#### Limitations

Certain limitations of this study stem from the nature of the topic under investigation. Self-relations are internal processes that usually operate outside conscious awareness. Individuals have difficulty, at least initially, describing this all-familiar yet previously unarticulated background of mental life. Another aspect of describing self-relations is that the experience is not necessarily most fully imparted through verbal language.

Access then can present difficulties in investigating this area. Also, the revealing personal nature of discussing self-relations is often a surprise for the interviewee. Despite my best efforts to prepare the participants there was some initial hesitancy in accessing their *experience* of self-relations,

rather than merely *thinking* about self-relations. I interpreted such hesitancy as an indication the participant needed the opportunity to proceed at their own pace.

Within the time and cost restraints of this study it was possible to interview and analyse effectively a maximum of four participants. This small number makes it difficult to draw inferences concerning specific areas such as, effects of gender on self-relations, cross-cultural differences, the range of possibilities in the structuring of self-relations, influences on the development of self-relations, and the manner in which therapist and client self-relations interact. These are all areas I would consider to be of great importance for future studies focussing on self-relations.

#### Implications for Research

Several potentially fruitful areas of study have been suggested in the foregoing sections. These include differences in the describing and descriptions of self-relations as influenced by (a) effects of gender, (b) cross-cultural influences, and (c) developmental issues.

It would be instructional to know more about (a) the range of possibilities in the structuring of self-relations, (b) influences on the development of self-relations, (c) the manner in which therapist and client self-relations interact, (d) the influences of choice of figurative language on client-therapist relationships, and (e) the significance of “you” in internal

dialogue.

Further research considerations include questions surrounding what factors contribute to the sense of a core self, or conversely what factors contribute to a multiple selves experience of self. What are the advantages and disadvantages of either of these experiences of self-relations? What differences are there between individuals from either perspective? What is the range of variations in self-relations? What factors contribute in the development of self-relations? Guidano (1991) argues that without a knowledge of etiology, that is, understanding the “relationship ... between observed behavior and the organization of the person who exhibits it” (p. 57), therapeutic interventions are little more than “guesswork”.

To gain such an understanding (between behavior and organization) and thereby provide appropriate treatment, the field of counselling must include research that illuminates developmental influences. The concept of self-relations provides one approach to viewing individual self-organization.

It is generally agreed that developmental factors influence the self-organization of individuals meeting diagnostic criteria of borderline personality disorder (Berelowitz & Tarnopolsky, 1993; Briere, 1992; Gold & Stricker, 1993; Perry & Herman, 1993; Reiker & Carmen, 1986; Zivney, Nash & Hulsey, 1988). Therefore, self-relations overall are likely to be

influenced by developmental factors. The complexity of the relationship and mutual influencing between structure and function (Guidano, 1991; Lerner, 1996) may in part be clarified with a more thorough understanding of self-relations.

In my work with clients who present with an alcohol or drug dependency issue, splitting behavior is an area on which we frequently focus. The relationship between splitting, a learned response to stress, and later drug or alcohol misuse is apparent in my practice. My assumption is that an individual who learns to respond to stress by “numbing out” - the intended outcome of splitting - is vulnerable to the practice of self-medication, that is, using drugs or alcohol to reduce affect. Research in this area could well provide early prevention measures for those at risk of developing addictions.

The behavior of splitting as experienced by the individual is another area I identify as warranting study. Such research could potentially provide more specific and appropriate therapeutic interventions for those individuals who seek treatment due to problems with self-integration.

There are numerous implications for research that arise from the results of this inquiry. I have mentioned the ones that are most directly related to my areas of interest.

### Concluding Remarks

In the introduction to this study the intention to learn “something I didn’t know” was clearly described as influential in the design of the research study. Was this aim accomplished? Yes, I believe so.

Before undertaking the research I had few preconceptions as to the nature of the participants’ self-relations. I was prepared for any manner and variety of descriptions and I did not anticipate any form of similarity between or within the participants’ accounts of their self-relations, their perceptions of their clients’ self-relations, or their therapeutic approaches.

It was therefore gratifying and unexpected to arrive at a finding as distinct as, “The inherent correspondence between the participants’ self-relations and their therapeutic interventions”. This finding allowed for an exploration of the dynamic relationship between style of figurative language, internal processing and therapeutic interventions. The complexity of implications arising from the results was a challenging and productive component of the study.

In turn, the identification of such implications led to the development of an exercise intended to assist counsellors, clients, and other interested individuals in learning more about their self-relations [Appendix A]. It is my intention to promote this exercise as a learning tool in the education of counsellors.

The study of self theory has not addressed a basic component of self, that is, self-relations. I am aware of no similar conceptualization of internal processes explicated in the psychological literature. The “lead-in” to understanding one’s own self-relations is through questions that do not directly ask for such an accounting. Rather, the questions bring to light the realm or direction toward an understanding of what is being asked. The exercise *Describing the experience of ‘being a self’* [Appendix A] was developed as one such way “in”. One of the questions in this exercise locates self-relations by asking “what it is like to shift from one context to another?” Lerner (1996) states that “a focus on process, particularly, on the process involved in the changing relations between individuals and their contexts, is at the cutting edge of contemporary developmental theory” (p. 781).

The results of this study demonstrate the significant qualitative difference between *understanding* a concept and *experiencing* that concept. Putting words to internal experiences allows for the identification of unrecognized, underlying, assumptions. Recognizing the degree to which an individual’s perceptions are truly governed by their perspective, is an important and necessary learning experience for counsellors in particular.

The more a counsellor knows about his or her own experience of self, that is, self-relations, the better able she or he can discern a client’s self-

relations. For individuals meeting diagnostic criteria for borderline personality disorder, and for most clients, improving the dynamics of their self-relations may be a necessary and important aspect of their therapy.

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**Appendix A: Describing the Experience of “Being a Self”**

### Describing the Experience of “Being a Self”

The intention of this exercise is to provide you with an opportunity to describe your self-relations. The term self-relations is meant to include a variety of conceptions of self-organization, such as: self-structure, internal working model of the self, self-representations, self-reference, relations to own internal states, conceptualizing the self, and constructing the self.

The process involves some preparation on your part and then a debriefing by a skilled listener. You may choose to work in pairs, thereby alternating the roles of interviewer and interviewee.

#### FIRST STEP:

In order to prepare for the interview you may want to consider the following suggestions, these suggestions are intended to assist you in paying attention to internal processes that typically take place out of awareness.

Prior to the interview you may find it helpful to spend some time noticing and reflecting on the experience of your shifting “I” perspective as the contexts (internal and external) of your day change. What is it like to move from one role into another, e.g., from counsellor to parent? What language do you use in describing these shifts to yourself? Do you refer within yourself to yourself as “I”, “you”, “we” or a combination thereof, and if so, what determines your self-referral? Do you experience yourself, your internal working model of self, as parts, roles, or selves, a combination, or in some other way? Is there a metaphor, simile, or paradigm that captures your sense of your lived experience of being a self? Would it be helpful for you to draw or in some other way depict your experience of self-relations?

#### SECOND STEP

Complete this exercise with your chosen partner by answering questions that focus on the following topics.

- 1) experience of self-relations, which encompasses descriptive language, e.g. metaphors, self-talk (use of “I”, “you”, etc.)
- 2) shifting “I” according to context, having a sense of roles/parts/selves
- 3) experience of a “critic voice”
- 4) how “parts” relate to each other
- 5) *for practicing counsellors*: perceptions of clients’ self-relations, individual dynamics, interventions employed when working with problems of self-integration

### **HINTS FOR THE INTERVIEWER**

*Stay focused on encouraging the interviewee to expand and clarify statements about what it is like in their internal world. Clarifying questions include asking “how do you know that?”, “who knows that?”. It is important to use the interviewee’s language as soon as possible, e.g., she or he may refer to “parts” as “aspects” so use that in forthcoming comments. Follow up on references to any belief system re: core self, authentic selves, “real me”, etc.*

*Take notes to assist in debriefing the interview.*

### **THIRD STEP**

Debrief the interview by discussing impressions gained by interviewer and interviewee. Note descriptive language and construct a drawing depicting the relationship of selves/parts/ roles to self as a whole and include belief systems. Relate interviewee’s self-relations to statements concerning clients.

**Appendix B: Letter of Initial Contact**

Letter of Initial Contact with Participants

Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_;

My name is Anita Snell and I am currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Victoria in the department of Psychological Foundations in Education, and I work as a counsellor in the community. I am writing this letter to invite you to be a participant in my doctoral research study on the lived experience of self-relations. Self-relations involves having awareness of being an “I” in ever changing contexts (internal and external).

In order to gain knowledge about self-relations in general, and about interruptions in the integration of selves, the site of the proposed research will focus on therapists who work with individuals who meet diagnostic criteria of Borderline Personality Disorder [BPD]. Borderline Personality Disorder is significant to the study in that the most commonly cited criterion for this disorder is that of problems with self-integration. I believe that through interviewing therapists, such as yourself, a wealth of insight, experience, and expertise concerning self-relations will be made available for analysis.

I am interested in gaining your description of your internal working model of self with a particular focus on the nature of the connections between selves/parts/roles. I am also interested in your perceptions of your clients' self-structure and associated problems of integration and how you work with promoting integration. I would like to emphasize that the psychiatric diagnostic criteria for BPD are included only to assist you in *identifying this certain type of client* - those that experience problems with self-integration - for the purposes of the research study. It is not necessary or pertinent that your clients have been diagnosed as having a Borderline Personality Disorder.

If you are interested in being a participant in this study please call me at my home number: \_\_\_\_\_. Then we can arrange for a convenient time for our interview that will be approximately 60-90 minutes long. After I have completed interviewing the participants for this study (a total of 4-5) I will be inviting them to take part in a focus group discussion. I will also be providing a preliminary and final analysis narrative and asking for feedback. You may choose to participate in all or just some components of the study. I will be very pleased to answer any questions you may have about your participation in this study.

In order to prepare for the interview I have a few suggestions you may want to consider; these suggestions are intended to assist you in paying attention to internal processes that typically take place out of awareness. Prior to our interview you may find it helpful to spend some time noticing and reflecting on

the experience of your shifting “I” perspective as the contexts (internal and external) of your day change. Do you refer within yourself to yourself as “I”, “you”, “we” or a combination thereof, and if so, what determines your self-referral? Do you experience yourself, your internal working model of self, as parts, roles, or selves, a combination, or in some other way? Is there a metaphor, simile, paradigm that captures your sense of your lived experience of being a self? If you wish to bring any materials, e.g., journal entries, drawings, related to the topic of our interview I would be very interested in receiving these.

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Anita Snell, M.A., doctoral candidate

**Appendix C: Consent Form**

### Participant Consent Form

Researcher: Anita Snell, doctoral candidate  
Faculty Advisor: John Anderson 721-7799

This research project is directed at studying the lived experience of self-relations. Self-relations involves having awareness of being an “I” in ever changing contexts (internal and external). In order to gain knowledge about self-relations in general, and about interruptions in the integration of selves, the research will focus on therapists who work with individuals who meet diagnostic criteria of Borderline Personality Disorder [BPD]. You will be interviewed for approximately 60-90 minutes and I will be asking you about your experience of self-relations. I am also interested in your perceptions of your clients’ (meeting BPD diagnostic criteria) self-structure and associated problems of integration and how you work with promoting integration. I may request a further interview or invite you to participate in a focus group sometime after our interview, this group will be approximately 3 hours in length. This research is for my doctoral dissertation.

Your participation is voluntary and you may freely withdraw from the study at any point in the research process without consequences. You may refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

You will be interviewed by the researcher and asked to describe your lived experience of self-relations. You will be asked to review and comment on the analysis of the interview. A further interview may be requested. You may be asked to be a participant in a focus group comprising other therapists and the researcher. You therefore should understand that your anonymity cannot be protected if you participate in the focus group.

The researcher may be inquiring as to your perceptions of some of your clients’ experience of self-relations and what therapeutic interventions you utilize with these clients, particularly regarding achieving and maintaining self-integration. You are asked to actively avoid revealing any information about clients that could identify them. You will assume responsibility for the content and extent of any client information disclosed.

The interview and focus group will be audiotaped. Only the researcher (or a paid assistant bound by confidentiality) will listen to the tapes, and then erase the tapes. Your name will be replaced with a code name and any information you may wish protected will not be used at your request. Any data collected, and subsequent documentation, will be kept in a locked cabinet and no person other than the researcher will have access to the data. All data generated from this study will be destroyed within 5 years. The results of the study, using your code name, will be published as part of the dissertation. If you withdraw at any time

from the study any data pertaining to yourself will be destroyed.

I consent to participating in the research described above, under the stated conditions.

Signature of Participant : \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Re-Interview Questions

### Re-interview Questions

[exact wording varied according to context]

1) Would like to know what is being referred to when during the interview there is a pause while you check something out and then struggle with coming up with words to describe what it is you are referring to. What are you referring to? Can you describe the process of going “inside”? (what words would you use) what happens between hearing the question and words coming out?

2) What do you encounter with clients in terms of beliefs/feelings about how they should be inside themselves? e.g., shame about dissociating? Investment in perceiving self in a certain way? Factors that determine self-relations?

3) Want to ask about “knowing”; you’ve said “I just know”. For a minute can you step outside of yourself and report to me your observations. Can “knowing” be affected/influenced/shaped by wanting/believing that it should be that way? If “know” when present/real/ grounded/ in coreself/ is wanting that experience a part of what creates the sense of knowing?

4) What is it like to be asked these questions? Do you have any feelings come up? Do you notice any investment in having a certain emotional reaction to the questions? What are the feelings about? Do you identify any fears, e.g., around having multiple selves? Do you identify any attachments to certain beliefs, e.g., having a core self? What drives the attachment?

5) How do you account for the variety of ways people know? One person’s innermost experience is of something that is not-self, another’s core experience is of being most themselves when centered.

**Appendix E: Professional Issues List**

Professional Issues List

AMBER

Model of therapy; Relation of model to research; Theory and parts; Her and part theory; Competence as a therapist; Feeling inarticulate as a therapist; Beliefs about clients self-structure; Working with clients; Parts work; Understanding of BPD; Client's reaction to becoming visible; Dealing with self; Connection with client; Clients attitude to disassociating; Effects of interview on work with client

ABBOTT

Details of practice; Curiosity of BPD; Matching intensity level of client; Use of rituals to shift; Frequency of shifting; Being a way the role of therapist defines; Working with clients; Internal relations of clients; Split of psych and body; Coping mechanisms of client; NB - client to know wants; Developmental BPD; Beliefs about clients; Children and therapy; Relation self and therapy; Usefulness of BPD label; Feelings around BPD label; Experience with BPD; Unconscious people; Purpose of therapy; Relation defined by therapeutic container; Authenticity and clients; Goal of therapy

PEETA

Model of therapy; Beliefs about psyche; Ways of working with clients; Attitude to BPD diagnosis; Losing core self; Dissociation different than aberrant self; Dissociation as healthy; Clients and dissociation; Example of blank self; Working with dissociation; Own experience and clients; Example of technique; Use of imagery in therapy; Finding patterns; Working with dissociation; Own experience and clients; Using experience with clients ; Optimistic belief system and clients; Efficacy as group facilitator; Image of flowers unfolding; Clients attitude to dissociation; Experiencing flow in a group

MAY

Scope of practice; Reciprocal nature of work with clients; Knowing what questions to ask; Needing time to shift; Differentiating between Spontaneous and work; Associations of "part"; Expectations of self as therapist; When therapist: Sense of self, Criterion for express, Role of watcher, Attention; Reciprocity with clients; Example of clients using upper body for release; Understanding of dissociation; Developmental; Working with BPD; Counter transference; Example of client not having words; Dissociation to avoid affect

**Appendix F: Organizational Flow Chart**

### Organizational Flow Chart

