
Meaning-Making Lenses in Counselling: Discursive, Hermeneutic-Phenomenological, and Autoethnographic Perspectives

Tom Strong
Nathan R. Pyle
Cecile deVries
Dawn N. Johnston
Allison J. Foskett
University of Calgary

ABSTRACT

Counselling can be seen as a context or process for meaning-making where clients and counsellors actively interpret and construct meaning. We examine meaning-making in counselling through the lenses of three research methods: (a) discourse analysis, (b) hermeneutic-phenomenology, and (c) autoethnography. Specifically, we relate the process and experience of counselling in ways consistent with how meaning-making is regarded by each of these research methods. In this regard, we describe each method as if it was a counselling theory. We conclude by reflecting upon how these lenses on meaning-making and counselling can inform counselling practice generally and generatively.

RÉSUMÉ

Le counselling peut être vue comme un contexte ou un processus de construction de sens où les clients et les conseillers activement interprètent et construisent la signification. La construction de sens en counselling est examiné à travers l'optique de trois méthodes de recherche : (a) l'analyse de discours, (b) la phénoménologie herméneutique, et (c) l'autoethnographie. Spécifiquement, le processus et l'expérience de counselling sont associés de manière consistante avec une perspective de construction de sens dans chacune de ces méthodes de recherche. Chaque méthode est décrite comme une théorie de counselling. La conclusion se veut une réflexion sur la contribution potentielle de ces optiques pour la pratique du counselling de façon générale et générative.

Meaning is at the heart of counselling for many counsellors. The focus on meaning varies according to counselling models, but conversation is where it features regardless of approach. Depending on the counsellor's view of meaning, and its relationship to understanding and change, one finds particular ways of listening and responding to clients. However, clients also bring their own meanings and ways of understanding to counselling.

How counsellors listen and respond to clients bears considerably on what gets worked out as "meaningful." At worst, counsellors can hijack clients' meanings with their professional meanings and ways of conversing (Parker, 1999). They can also take up a common idealization: that there are correct meanings (read: the counsellor's), and client deviations from them warrant therapeutic intervention. Acknowledging multicultural diversity, this latter view of meaning has become

suspect, a “colonizing” move for some (e.g., House, 2003). Minimally, counsellors need to be mindful as to how they “position” themselves as listeners and responders, being also responsive to clients’ positions (Winslade, 2005). As a conversational host (Anderson, 1997), a counsellor’s flexibility in meaningful dialogue matters as much as the client’s.

Qualitative research, too, is often concerned with meaning, focusing in increasing ways on how to make sense of clients’ experiences, including experiences of counselling itself. Research approaches, like counselling approaches, are informed by theories on such matters as meaning. Included in these theories are ideas on what meaning is and how meaning-making occurs. With trends toward evidence-based practice, we note that the American Psychological Association (APA) now indicates “evidence” can be qualitative (Levant, 2005) and derived from meaning-making processes such as counselling. Qualitative researchers make meaning in varied ways, as do clients and counsellors. We see in the sense-making efforts of qualitative researchers some useful analogies to how theory-informed counsellors make sense of what clients tell them.

Our interest in this article is with the stances taken on meaning-making by three common qualitative research approaches: (a) discourse analysis, (b) hermeneutic-phenomenology, and (c) autoethnography. We take up these stances in an unusual manner, portraying counselling and clients’ efforts within it as meaning-making endeavours consistent with each of our stances. We see clients as active meaning-makers as they talk with counsellors and will depict counselling in ways that discourse analysts, hermeneutic-phenomenologists, and autoethnographers could relate to it. We want to convey how these research approaches offer counsellors ways of making sense of clients and the counselling process, how each approach offers a “lens” on counselling. Our aim is not to propose new methods of counselling based on these lenses, but to suggest additional ways clients could be engaged and understood as meaning-makers when talking with counsellors.

THE DISCURSIVE LENS

Many discourse analysts take up a view that runs counter to how many counsellors regard meaning. For them, meaning is in plain view, in what people say and how they communicate. There is no attempt to read beyond client meanings, though critical discourse analysts often aim to locate clients’ understandings and ways of communicating in cultural discourses. Discourse analysts are concerned with how meaning is *performed* as clients and counsellors talk. This focus on performing meaning can initially confuse those new to the notion, so a few explanatory comments are in order. A common assumption is that meaning relates to the information or content of what is said by speakers. This assumption overlooks how things get said and that people do not talk to just exchange information—they *use* their talk to be understood and influential with each other. There is another element quite critical to understanding meaning as a discourse analyst: meanings are dialogical. Meaning needs to be worked out between speakers, because they bring

different interpretive backgrounds to their dialogues. To discourse analysts, these efforts at working out meaning are matters that speakers show each other in ways researchers (and counsellors) can notice. For example, speakers have many ways they show each other misunderstanding. In the immediacies of their talking, their talk is informed not only by what they want to say, but by how they are being received as they say what they want to say. Speakers want to be understood or influential and often shift their words and delivery in the course of talking to accomplish this. For the discourse analyst, these efforts at working out meaning, at talking in ways that are demonstrably understood by conversational partners, and accomplishments made through talking are all matters of conversational intrigue.

For a discourse analyst, clients, like any speaker, are active meaning-makers who use language to coordinate their activities with others, counsellors included. Dialogue mostly occurs without much reflection between people, and this can be considered a good thing. The “work” in working out meanings can be largely behind them in their relationships so they can use words and ways of talking in unproblematic and taken-for-granted ways. In counselling, however, this can be a problematic assumption, even though the speakers ostensibly share a common language. A novel encounter, such as counselling, highlights how client and counsellor go about practically interpreting (making sense of) each other, finding ways and words to move on together in their dialogues (Heritage, 1984). This interpreting is not the activity of one speaker alone; it is a shared endeavour. Neither speaker has the capacity for “telementation” (Harris, 1981)—to peer into each other’s minds to know exactly how they are being conceptually understood. Instead, what matters is what speakers do with each other’s words and ways of talking in trying to go forward in dialogue. “Going forward” is another meaning they have to work out as they talk.

Clients and Discourse Analysis

Clients, from this perspective, would focus on how their talk performs in terms of what counsellors do with it. Very attentive to what Goffman (1967) called “face-work,” such clients would be highly attuned to their rapport with the counsellor in how utterances are received and responded to. These clients would be concerned with the adequacy of words used to articulate their experience, recognizing that for every word settled on, other worthy contenders for representing their experience had to be passed over (Derrida, 1976). Clinically, key words might be a worthy place for the counsellor to get curious: Why this word and not others? What isn’t adequately accounted for with this word? How has living by this word gone for the client? A key word might offer one viable way of describing a client’s problem or its possible solutions. For discourse analysts, since there are no universally correct ways of using words, the issue is about the fit and effectiveness of words as clients relate them to their circumstances.

Counselling is not scripted, despite the many conversational guidelines counsellors receive in their training. For discursively oriented clients, this hopefully means that their talk is not overtaken by the ways of talking that counsellors bring to

the encounter. Also, there will always be a somewhat improvised quality to their dialogue as client and counsellor use words and ways of talking to be responsive to each other. Discursively, that means that each speaker's turn at talk has a very important gap before their conversational other takes a turn. Where neurons have synaptic gaps, speakers have conversational gaps across which important developments like "uptakes" or "declines" occur. A counsellor's question might be "declined"; it might get a client's question back, for example. Mostly, speakers want their talk received and understood in the manner they would prefer (i.e., "taken up"), so great attention is focused on "uptakes," in how speakers extend what each other has been saying. However, sometimes speakers need to do extra work, like repairing misunderstandings, or working out a meaning or way of talking that suits them where earlier ways of talking and understanding came up short.

Of course, meaning in the conventional sense seems to have been given a miss here. Instead of pointing to thoughts and beliefs, the focus is on what speakers perceive is occurring between them in their conversations. Stories told by clients to counsellors are no different. How a counsellor listens to the client's story, the questions asked, the parts that evoke a sense of significance—all contribute to a particular "telling" or co-narration of the client's story (Bavelas, Coates & Johnson, 2000). Narrative therapists suggest that alterations to how a story is told can transform the quality of experience that prompted its initial telling (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Still, a counsellor can never know the fullness of the client's particular story as it is related. Words, for discourse analysts, carry the nuances of past experiences that can never be fully articulated. A word like "death" can carry several meanings that change over time, even though a client hopes the counsellor hears them "right" each time. Discursively, being "right" means that adequate words for the client at a given time are in use, a "rightness" that counsellor and client *show* each other, in further words and gestures, to indicate their talk can continue to go forward.

The picture hopefully emerging of the "discursive client" is someone who carefully attends to the *use* of words and ways of talking; not only those he or she uses, but those used in response by the counsellor. As speakers, client and counsellor have a choreography of talk to work out as well as a coordinated sense of what each other intends and means with their use of words. When that goes well, they develop understandings and ways of talking that are uniquely theirs, taking up or extending each others' language in what is later said, in an interweave of shared dialogue (Ferrara, 1994). This involves coordinating intentions as they go forward, a matter also worked out in the language they use (Anderson, 1997). Words, stories, and their respected parts in dialogue serve clients and counsellors as collaborative sense-making tools (Shotter, 1993; Shotter & Katz, 1999). Thus, discursive efforts to create meaning involve finding apt and shared ways of using talk to accomplish understandings and actions befitting client and counsellor. The parts about knowing what goes on in a client's heart or mind, or what things should "really mean," are less important than how words and ways of talking can help accomplish things for clients and counsellors.

THE HERMENEUTIC-PHENOMENOLOGY LENS

There is a bigger and different realm of meaning-making than the turn-by-turn interactions of dialogue often encountered in conversation. Hermeneutic-phenomenology (H-P), our next lens, is described by Van Manen (1990) as being “concerned with meaning—to be human is to be concerned with meaning, to desire meaning” (p. 79). In this way, H-P finds a comfortable home in conversations and inquiries that are about the constructed meanings of phenomena (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Such phenomena can include the “what” a client brings to counselling. From a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, counsellors and clients are invited and engaged in meaning-making through constructing in-depth meanings of their (clients’) lived experiences.

Hermeneutic-phenomenology has had a long and viable history of qualitatively studying psychological phenomena (e.g., Hein & Austin, 2001; Osborne, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1989; Van Manen, 1990; Von Eckartsberg, 1998). This approach is not only philosophically highly developed, but also offers well-established methodological approaches for analyzing and making sense of lived experiences. Similarly, the purpose of counselling is often to provide clients with opportunities to view their experiences “up-close” and from “a distance” in an effort to make sense of them and construct meaning. Hence, H-P offers counsellors (and clients) guidelines for finding ways of looking at the meanings that clients’ lived experiences may yield.

Dilthey (1987) wrote that nature is *explained*, but human life must be *understood*. For Van Manen (1990), “intentionality” is our inseparable connection to the world; hence, he argued that to know the world we must become the world. Similarly, through an H-P lens, the intentions of counsellors can become part of clients’ lived experiences as they “hold, understand, value, and interpret” (Larsen, 1999, p. 69) what clients bring to counselling. Correspondingly, client intentions through an H-P lens mean immersing themselves, being aware of, and becoming the lived experiences they share with counsellors, in order to find understandings and construct meanings. Heidegger’s (1962) concept of *Dasein* (which refers to “the mode of being human” or “being-in-the-world”) is relevant to these curious and inquisitive aspects of one’s existence and being. To be human is to be curious about and to explore one’s being-ness. Phenomenological research usually originates in the life world (Van Manen), which is a natural attitude to everyday life that is original, pre-reflective, and pre-theoretical. Once a reflexive nature of everyday experiences is brought into natural attitudes, the construction of meaning can occur. In this way, counsellors join clients in exploring with them their being-ness and their life worlds and to take part in their lived experiences as meanings are constructed.

Contextualization and Hermeneutic-Phenomenology

Hein and Austin (2001) explained that H-P involves contextualization in understanding lived phenomena. For Heidegger (1962), a “hermeneutics of

existence” characterizes how we see clients forging interpretive understandings of existence across different contexts. To find these meanings, hermeneutic-phenomenologists not only describe their existence in life worlds as they appear, but interpret existence as it is embedded in different contexts. In this respect, Gadamer (1998) explained that understanding is not isolated. Counsellors drawing on an H-P perspective would see counselling as an opportunity to be attentive and descriptive (i.e., phenomenological) to how things appear in their life worlds. At the same time, counselling would be interpretive (i.e., hermeneutical), since most phenomena are interpretable (i.e., considered in context). Counsellors interested in an H-P perspective may join clients in exploring their lived experiences and how they construct meaning with an acknowledgement that “the (phenomenological) ‘facts’ of lived experiences are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced” (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 180-181).

Van Manen (1990) also saw the overall aim of H-P writing as describing “one” meaning for a phenomenon, while interpreters (read: clients or counsellors) will have multiple interpretations of that phenomenon. He regarded the meaning of a lived experience as multi-dimensional and multi-layered, since meaning is dependent on the diverse contexts in which people are embedded. An H-P meaning-maker would be engaged in self-reflection, which requires an awareness of one’s personal background and assumptions (Gadamer, 1998). From a counselling standpoint, this quest for self-knowing can be joined and encouraged, because benefits can be derived from such reflection (Robertson-Malt, 1999). Accordingly, both counsellors and clients can identify various attitudes and motives arising from the cultural, historical, and social contexts influencing their behaviour and understanding. Bergum (as cited in Hein & Austin, 2001) used a prism analogy to illustrate that a single, saturated, and final comprehension of a phenomenon is not possible. Instead, whenever a prism turns and catches the light differently, it changes as one part becomes hidden while another opens. Similarly, counsellors will vary in their interpretations of the same phenomenon a client brings to session. Therefore, from an H-P lens, clients seek to become not only aware of their own contexts, but also counsellors who are aware of their own contexts.

The ways clients express and reflect on their lived experiences are critical to their descriptions and interpretations when constructing meaning from their experiences. This is where clients and counsellors can become empirically hermeneutic (Hein & Austin, 2001) by emphasizing and treating experience as having a semantic and textual structure. This is a common theme taken up by prominent hermeneutic-phenomenologists: understanding, description, interpretation, and speaking are intertwined with and manifested in language and other forms of semiotics (Gadamer, 1998; Heidegger, 1962; Van Manen, 1990).

Clients, Conversation, and Hermeneutic-Phenomenology

In a practical way, Laverty (2003) suggested H-P conversations stay as close to lived experiences as possible, to articulate phenomena as lived experiences, and to assist in interpreting meaning of phenomena. For these reasons, hermeneutic-

phenomenologists (e.g., Crist & Tanner, 2003) encourage interpreters to note physical expressions, tone of voice, and other paralinguistic gestures for how these contribute to how lived experiences are experienced and made meaningful in the moment. Counselling involves using speech and language in reflecting on experiences, and in this regard H-P counselling is often more linguistically retrospective than introspective. Extending this line of thought, descriptive and insightful writing can be used to engage clients emotionally and cognitively as they live through experiences (e.g., Gadamer, 1998; Van Manen, 1990). Writing (e.g., counsellors' notes or clients' journaling, reflexive writing, poetry, etc.) can be used to assist in constructing meanings from clients' experiences. This can further a textual reflection of lived experiences, whether as clients' verbal "texts" (i.e., spoken narratives) or written texts (i.e., written narratives) of their lived experiences. H-P's linguistic approach toward meaning-making thereby assists in constructing and communicating the significance and meaning of clients' texts of their lives.

Hermeneutic-phenomenology employs a cyclical (as opposed to linear) approach to co-constructing meaning known as the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1998; Robertson-Malt, 1999; Van Manen, 1990). Gadamer saw "understanding" as a basic structure of human experiences (which he referred to as *Bildung*) from which new considerations can be created when people are open to the meanings others may bring. Meaning-making for the H-P client would be worked through with the counsellor in an ongoing, interpretive exchange—in a relational and meaningful process that is not "discovered" but continually negotiated. Hermeneutic-phenomenology's interests in the lived experiences of people draw attention to the mundane, trivial, and taken for granted aspects of experiences and put language to such potentially forgotten moments (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). A hermeneutic-phenomenological counselling approach would invite clients to attend to such experiences and with the counsellor, engage in a conversation and a process of reflecting, examining, and interpreting these moments. Through such a process, client and counsellor understandings emerge. In Gadamer's words:

Understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning ... To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were. (p. 375)

In counselling conversations, clients influence and are influenced by history as well as individual and relational factors. Laverty (2003) described how meaning "is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our background and experiences" (p. 8). Hermeneutic-phenomenological counsellors view clients as bringing with them a *horizon* comprising assumptions, values, and experiences, where "everything is seen from a particular vantage point" (Laverty, p. 10). Similarly, counsellors bring their "horizons" and "vantage points" to meaning-making interactions with clients—ideally resulting in a fusion of horizons. Such fusions of horizons evolve and contribute to changes in meaning, but as a byproduct of dialogic interaction and not as the will of individual speakers, like the counsellor's.

Applying an H-P lens to counselling provides clients and counsellors with opportunities to construct meanings through collaboration. This approach provides clients with ways through which rich explorations of their lived experiences can occur. Through the interaction of client and counsellor and their respective contexts, meanings are created. Thereby, counsellors applying an H-P lens can aim to understand clients by co-constructing meaning through a therapeutic interaction. Consequently, clients will be able to echo what Morton (1985) stated in *The Journey is Home*: “You heard me. You heard me all the way. I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story. You heard me to my own speech” (p. 205).

THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY LENS

Autoethnography is a relatively recent research tradition largely associated with Carolyn Ellis and her colleague, Art Bochner (e.g., Ellis & Bochner, 1992, 2000). For Ellis and Bochner, people are natural meaning-makers engaged in a personal research project of contextually making sense of themselves and life. This involves drawing meaningful connections between personal and cultural experiences. The autoethnographic (AE) researcher or counsellor is concerned with self-narratives or personal stories, and the process of *how* these stories are told. An autoethnography is a self-narrative that describes the self within a specific context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Thus, the researcher who positions him or herself as an autoethnographer and the counsellor who positions him or herself as an “AE counsellor” pays careful attention not only to the speaker’s story, but to the background context or foundation from which the speaker’s story is continually constructed.

Research in AE, however, is unlike what one would associate with traditional research approaches. The purpose of AE is to author evocative accounts of one’s life that draw from life’s rich range of emotional and sensory experiences in ways that matter and make a difference (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Engaging in the process, while drawing from the best resources useful in constructing autobiographies that matter and make a difference, is part of the research experience. From our vantage point, people can be already involved in such autobiographical projects, often without being aware, which can make counselling an interesting resource in the self-authoring process.

Meaning-Making in AE Counselling

Counsellors and researchers can contribute to an AE-based meaning-making process by paying attention to, listening to, and building upon clients’ idiosyncratic and microcosmic language forms that include metaphors, similes, idioms, descriptive visualizations, quotes, beliefs, life rules, clichés, and so on. These are examples of the linguistic resources clients might draw from in their autobiographical efforts. As such, an AE counsellor welcomes and invites reflection on such language forms by opening, exploring, and deepening the contextual meanings intended (or meant to be represented) by these talked-out pieces of language.

The AE counsellor can be seen as a narrative facilitator, a tour guide of sorts, who helps clients navigate their way through *their* story, to arrive at personally satisfying and fulfilling meanings. Since the focus is on furthering and deepening a personal story already being narrated, the focus is on finding words and ideas most apt in relating it. As active participants in the storying process, counsellors are encouraged to recognize their reflexive contributions and subsequent impact on clients' shared stories. This journey is "guided" by the counsellor contributing questions and self-reflections on the client's story, as well as by the counsellor's own stories that inform her or his interactions with the client. These aspects potentially lend to enriching the meaning a client could create on her or his own.

Similar to narrative counselling, the AE counsellor is not concerned with capturing or defining an "exact" problem or an "exact" story. She or he brings a narrative perspective that there is no absolute truth or interpretation for any story (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Instead, a client's story is encouraged to evolve with depth often resulting in new, alternative, and richer meanings that call forth further reflections from the client. Welcoming these new reflections can be similar to encountering an undiscovered pathway in the park upon which one can experience new possibilities. With less attention paid to the accuracy of the story, the AE-ear is more intent on listening for how the story may evolve as counsellor and client interact and develop their relationship (Ellis, 2004). As such, the AE counsellor respects a collaborative definition of "meaning," which may differ for each client, as will each client's uniqueness and interactions with the counsellor. An AE definition of meaning is also recognized as one that is fluid and will change over time, both between and during sessions, as new understandings are negotiated between counsellor and client. Meaning may also change for and within clients as they speak, hear, and listen to their stories being told.

A good autoethnography is noted for its ability to engage the "reader," which would be analogous to the counsellor's capacity to connect with clients (Ellis, 1999). An AE counsellor intends to become engaged in the client's story in such a way that important meanings and nuances are discussed evocatively, and are enriched with emotion to include as many different sensory faculties as possible (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Facilitating this excitation and fostering the flow of the client's story shows that the counsellor is enthusiastically interested in welcoming and elaborating the details of the client's story. Sensing the counsellor's genuine interest and empathy, the client feels encouraged and supported to share more intimate details of her or his story. Therefore, how clients share their narrative is often dependent upon the characteristics and willingness of the counsellor to become engaged (Ellis, 2004). Thus, AE counsellors and researchers need to be aware of how their various stances on what they are being told affect a client's willingness to share more intimate and/or idiosyncratic details of the story. Milton Erickson's influence in psychotherapy illustrates this in that his questions typically elicited something fascinating and unique from clients (Freedman & Combs, 1996). He conveyed to his clients, in various ways, his eagerness to hear *their* answers.

Autoethnographic counsellors attempt to engage their clients on many levels, to recreate with them what it is in their stories that are important to them. This high level of engagement is facilitated by the many different modalities for expression that AE recognizes and utilizes. Song, poetry, plays, stories, talking, dance, music, yoga, media, journalling, art, role play, history, cinematherapy, bibliotherapy, painting, novels, comics, and conversation are a few of the different modes of expression which AE recognizes. As an example, a counsellor working with a young woman struggling with an eating disorder might engage her by exploring the ways in which the client connects herself with her world. Through this, the counsellor may come to understand that the client recognizes and defines herself through media and television images. From this point, the client and counsellor can begin to discuss the images she chooses to relate to and those she does not. Together they can begin to understand why she chooses to associate herself with certain images and how they are related to her self-image and relationship with food.

A more collaborative and self-conscious process than the typical reflective counselling interview, AE counselling would enable clients to access a deeper realm of personal meaning. This is of particular significance when the client is sharing personal and emotional topics that require the reciprocity of trust (Ellis, 2004). Additionally, an understanding of the different ways in which people create and express meaning changes the face of counselling. No longer does it need to be seen only as face-to-face dialogue. A new door is opened to innovative possibilities so that clients and willing counsellors can create the type of counselling clients want, based on how they experience their worlds. Thus, counselling goals and the processes to attain them can creatively be found.

An AE counsellor may use any of the above modalities of expression to help clients embrace their marginalized voices and experiences, which is another aim of an autoethnography (Ellis, 2004). Thus, an AE counsellor is concerned with how clients balance and negotiate their multiple voices or “parts,” each of which may struggle or compete to express a different aspect or perspective on a story (Bochner, 1997). For example, it is possible for a woman to become conscious of how her different parts or voices respond differently to various cultural messages regarding her body-image. On the one hand, a women could identify with that part of her that is conscious and actively resists media messages; while simultaneously identifying with that part of her that yearns to fit in with cultural norms. The AE counsellor honours these multiple dimensions of experience and reality, while facilitating with clients the talking-out of these different voices that inform, deepen, and enrich clients’ stories.

THREE MEANING-MAKING LENSES IN ACTION

We would now like to relate some ways our three meaning-making lenses might be useful in counselling a client with the same presenting concern. Bill, a second-year undergraduate student, presented with concerns at his university counselling centre about anxiety and “not fitting in” upon returning to his studies from his

summer break. As discursively oriented counsellors, we would be interested in two aspects in how he presents his concern: his choice of particular language to describe his concern, and his manner of presenting the concern. On the first aspect, we would welcome but inquire as to how Bill has made sense of his concern so far, the discursive resources (words, metaphors, symbols) he used, the other resources he passed over, and why. In particular, we would be interested in his use of evaluative language. This would all be done as part of finding a language most apt for articulating Bill's concern. But this ties into the second aspect, of joining Bill's discourse in its content as well as how it is performed, as an important step in developing a shared language. The dialogic dance of counselling involves coordinating whats (semantic content) and hows (performative elements) of discourse between counsellor and client to create "common ground" from which change can be considered and negotiated.

Hermeneutic-phenomenology would invite us to consider that every problem makes sense when related to the meaningful context from which it originated. But, to understand that context requires Bill's best descriptions of his lived experiences. Counselling itself can be considered a microcosm of the hermeneutic circle (Strong, 2003), so we see our conversations as inescapably adding meaning to Bill's lived experiences so far. This necessitates that we collaboratively evaluate what is generated by our conversations that could be useful to Bill. Some of this is because of the different interpretive backgrounds we bring to our dialogues and thus the words and experiences arising in them. Writing, such as in a journal, would be a good way of extending our discussions, and in developing rich process-oriented descriptions that reflect and hopefully transform Bill's experience.

Autoethnography reminds us of the struggling author in everyone. Accordingly, Bill's "story" could be seen as having arrived at a juncture where he no longer feels the author of his story, so we would want, through counselling, to engage him as both author and editor-in-chief of his story. His would be anything but a clinical story; it would be an evocative personal account of his facing and hopefully overcoming "anxiety" as he co-articulates it with the help of the counsellor. If this seems to have parallels to what one finds in narrative therapy (e.g., Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2007), the parallels begin and end with the difference in focus in how such stories are told and transformed. In AE, the focus is on engaging the researcher (by analogy here, Bill) in an arrested or ongoing process of inquiry that is less guided by the kinds of questioning techniques used by narrative therapists. The AE client's question animates the storied inquiry counsellors can join and help to co-construct, with an eye on transcending the problem that initiated this inquiry.

THERE IS A UNIVERSE OF MEANING TO BE TALKED INTO BEING

In our view, counselling is rich with meaningful possibilities. We, of course, are not alone in sharing this view, as there are many meaning-focused approaches to counselling (e.g., Jungian, narrative, existential). Our difference has been to

import a research lens where normally one would find a theoretical counselling approach guiding a sense of what meaning is, how clients relate to meaning, and what makes counselling meaningful. Our purpose has not been to create new models of counselling, but to show how some qualitative researchers, who also talk with and make sense of people's experiences, create meaning. In a sense, we have borrowed the eyes, ears, attitudes, and assumptions of some qualitative researchers we are drawn to, to make the case that meaning can be understood and constructed in various ways in counselling.

Typically, counsellors turn to research to find results that might inform their practice. Here, we have invited them on co-researching journeys as these relate to conducting meaning-*full* research. Research has often been considered a step in processes leading to change, usually to furnish information from which changes can be made. However, research can promote a process of inquiry that itself promotes change. A good question can be a powerful intervention in counselling (Tomm, 1988), as can helping clients articulate personally meaningful stories of their experiences (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Clients with a curious attitude can engage their fruitful inquisitiveness on what they "know" and do not know (Anderson, 1997).

While we like the research methods we have related here as counselling "lenses," we like even more the notion that clients actively try to make sense of their lives and circumstances in ways that are good for them and others. Their efforts at meaning-making do not stop for an exchange of information so that counsellors can then direct them—though they can become (a) patient. Seeing clients as active meaning-makers, we are encouraging counsellors to join in clients' efforts, to use their turns at talk to explore meaning-making where it seems stalled, discouraged, overwhelmed, lacking in coherence, and so on. Together, their words and ways of talking are what "talks into being" (Heritage, 1984) or significance that which hopefully clients find meaningful. While not all clients are seeking meaning and may be more action-focused, typically there are some aspects of counselling where a meaning-focused lens could be relevant.

By going inside meaning-making efforts in counselling as envisioned by discourse analysts, hermeneutic-phenomenologists, and autoethnographers, we have tried to depict some ways meaning-making can be seen to occur in counselling. Certainly, one finds research in counselling journals and student theses relating to meaning-making and counselling in these ways. The different skills counsellors bring to meaning-making are many and varied, but how they conceptualize their part in meaning-making with clients has been our focus. Counselling approaches take different stances on meaning, some suggesting that meaning is already formed or that it can be correctly known. We agree with social constructionists who say that we need talk and words to talk about a talk-independent reality (Sampson, 1993). Experience does not name itself but good conversations—those where discourse analysis, hermeneutic-phenomenology, and autoethnography lenses are used—can help people understand and relate to their experiences in meaningful ways.

References

- Anderson, H. (1997). *Conversation, language and possibilities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bavelas, J. B., Coates, L., & Johnson, T. (2000). Listeners as co-narrators. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 941–952.
- Bochner, A. P. (1997). It's about time: Narrative and the divided self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3, 418–438. Retrieved June 1, 2007, from <<http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.lib.ualgary.ca/itx/start.do?prodId=AONE>>.
- Crist, J. D., & Tanner, C. A. (2003). Interpretations/analysis methods in hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology. *Nursing Research*, 52, 202–205.
- Derrida, J. (1976). *Writing and difference* (A. Bass, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dilthey, W. (1987). *Introduction to the human sciences*. Toronto, ON: Scholarly Book Services.
- Ellis, C. (1999). Heartfelt autoethnography. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9, 669–683.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. (1992). Telling and performing personal stories: The constraints of choice in abortion. In C. Ellis & M. G. Flaherty (Eds.), *Investigating subjectivity: Research on lived experience* (pp. 79–101). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 733–768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ferrara, K. (1994). *Therapeutic ways with words*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1998). *Truth and method* (2nd ed., H. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). New York: Continuum.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.
- Harris, R. (1981). *The language myth*. London: Duckworth.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper and Row.
- Hein, S., & Austin, W. J. (2001). Empirical and hermeneutic approaches to phenomenological research in psychology: A comparison. *Psychological Methods*, 6, 3–17.
- Heritage, J. (1984). *Garfinkel and ethnomethodology*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- House, R. (2003). *Therapy beyond modernity: Deconstructing and transcending profession-centered therapy*. London: Karnac Books.
- Larsen, D. J. (1999). Eclecticism: Psychological theories as interwoven stories. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 21, 69–83.
- Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2, Article 3. Retrieved April 30, 2006, from <http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/2_3final/pdf/laverty.pdf>.
- Levant, R. F. (2005, July). *American Psychological Association statement on evidence-based practice in psychology*. Retrieved May 26, 2006, from <<http://www.apa.org/practice/ebpstatement.pdf>>.
- Morton, N. (1985). *The journey is home*. Boston: Beacon.
- Osborne, J. W. (1990). Some basic existential-phenomenological research methodology for counselors. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, 24, 79–91.
- Parker, I. (Ed.). (1999). *Deconstructing psychotherapy*. New York: Routledge.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology: Exploring the breadth of human experience* (pp. 41–60). New York: Plenum.
- Reed-Danahay, D. E. (Ed.). (1997). *Autoethnography: Rewriting the self and the social*. New York: Berg.

- Robertson-Malt, S. (1999). Listening to them and reading me: A hermeneutic approach to understanding the experience of illness. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 29, 290–297.
- Sampson, E. E. (1993). *Celebrating the other: A dialogic account of human nature*. Toronto, ON: Harper Collins.
- Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational realities*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Shotter, J., & Katz, A. (1999). 'Living moments' in dialogic exchanges. *Human Systems*, 9, 81–93.
- Strong, T. (2003). Getting curious about meaning-making in counselling. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 31, 259–273.
- Tomm, K. (1988). Interventive interviewing: Part III. Intending to ask lineal, circular, strategic, or reflexive questions? *Family Process*, 27, 1–15.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, ON: Althouse.
- Von Eckartsberg, R. (1998). Existential–phenomenological research. In R. Valle (Ed.), *Phenomenological inquiry in psychology: Existential and transpersonal dimensions* (pp. 21–61). New York: Plenum.
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Wilson, H., & Hutchinson, S. (1991). Triangulation of qualitative methods: Heideggerian hermeneutics and grounded theory. *Qualitative Health Research*, 1, 263–276.
- Wynslade, J. M. (2005). Utilising discursive positioning in counselling. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 33, 351–364.

About the Authors

Tom Strong, Ph.D., R. Psych., is an associate professor in the Division of Applied Psychology, University of Calgary. His area of research includes social constructionist practices in therapy and discursive approaches to counselling research and practice.

Nathan R. Pyle, M.Ed., R. Psych., is a Ph.D. candidate in the Division of Applied Psychology, University of Calgary. His practice and research interests include children's mental health, written communication in counselling, and interprofessional education and practice.

Cecile de Vries, B.A. (Hons.), M.Sc., completed her Master's research in counselling psychology at the University of Calgary, exploring lived experiences of spiritual writing from a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective. She is a registered psychologist in Australia, and will be investigating how writing processes facilitate meaning-making as well as psychological and spiritual transformation for her Ph.D. research.

Dawn N. Johnston graduated from the University of Calgary with her Master's of Science in counselling psychology. Her research passions include the mind/body connection, yoga therapy, and spiritual development. Her Master's thesis was an autoethnography on spiritual identity development, and she intends to continue this line of research in her future Ph.D. studies.

Allison J. Foskett, B.A. (Hons.), completed her Master's of Science degree in counselling psychology at the University of Calgary. Her research interests fall within the topics of positive psychology and self-help resources. Her Master's thesis was an autoethnographic inquiry into self-help book reading and how it can improve psychological, spiritual, and practical well-being.

Address correspondence to Dr. Tom Strong, Associate Professor, Division of Applied Psychology, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive NW Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4, email <strongt@ucalgary.ca>.