Homework Tasks: An Exploration into how Between-session Tasks are Co-constructed and Experienced by Adolescents in Solution-Focused Counselling Sessions

“…you just thought my thing that I wanted…you just thought my thoughts…”

-Client

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Research project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Counselling at the University of Canterbury

June 2016
Abstract

Solution-focused therapy is a client-centred, strengths-based approach that aims to work with clients to help them recognise their own unique abilities and resources that they can use to make positive change in their lives. Solution-focused counsellors frequently conclude consultations by agreeing with the client on something useful for them to do between sessions with the aim of clients taking small steps towards their therapeutic goals. There is little research investigating this co-construction of between-session tasks and none that explores the clients’ experiences of this process. This study attempts to address this gap in the literature. Qualitative methods and a case study design were used to explore both the process and the clients’ experiences relating to between-session task discussions. This research was conducted in a New Zealand high school counselling setting with 4 adolescent participants who each participated in a maximum of 5 individual, solution-focused counselling sessions and 1 semi-structured final interview. Research data from transcripts of counselling sessions and final interviews and researcher observations and reflections were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: co-constructive conversations about client goals and past successes reveal appropriate between-session tasks; tasks were seen to be helpful and worked to build client confidence and support clients’ thinking; client suggested tasks were most ideal, however if tasks were aligned to what clients wanted, counsellor suggested tasks were acceptable; following up on how clients engaged with tasks (when they did not arise naturally in conversation) provided useful information for the therapeutic process and was helpful for clients. Findings from this practice-based research make a useful contribution to the current literature, showing how between-sessions tasks can be talked about in solution-focused counselling sessions with adolescents, and most importantly add the client’s perspective about this specific part of the counselling process.
Acknowledgements

In any significant venture that one embarks upon, there are wonderful people along the way that instruct, support, pick up the slack, encourage, and on the whole, make the journey much more manageable. I would like to acknowledge the many people who have made a difference for me during the time of this study.

Thank you to the four wonderful students who volunteered to participate in this research project and who willingly shared their experiences with me. This could not have happened without them. I would also like to thank my supervisors Judi Miller, Shanee Barraclough and Lois Tonkin for their expertise, support and encouragement during this research.

A special thank you to all my family and friends who have supported and encouraged me along the way, especially my mum, Margret, who is my counsellor, reader and cheerleader extraordinaire. I continue to appreciate your affirming support of me in all my endeavours.

Most of all I would like to thank my wonderful husband Richard, who has supported me and our family tirelessly for the past two years. Without him this ship would have sunk! Thank you for all your support, the cooked meals, the cleaning and generally going the extra mile in every way. I owe you! I look forward to being present again and available for many more coffees and special moments.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background and Context for the Study

During my counselling practice in high school settings, I have often been intrigued by clients’ huge, between-session changes. It has amazed me how much progress they have made towards their goals after just one session of counselling. On one occasion, I asked a young woman who was completing therapy, after achieving her goals, what it was that was most helpful. She said it was the homework tasks that she had done. She related how having them had helped her monitor her behaviour and choices more carefully, resulting in her improved situation. I had written the tasks down for her and she had kept them neatly folded in her phone cover each week. It seemed to me that having these tasks had helped order her thinking which affected her actions and her therapeutic outcomes. However, not all of my clients have engaged with between-session tasks so enthusiastically.

These observations sparked an interest in exploring this part of the solution-focused, therapeutic process and the kinds of ways I can talk about between-session tasks with my clients so that they might engage with them and get the maximum benefit out of therapy. Clients only spend one hour per week with the therapist; it is in the client’s real life outside of therapy where changes are made (Hanton, 2011). It is therefore useful for them to be focusing on some aspect of personal growth or change during the rest of the week, between sessions, just as my young client did.

Between-session tasks are commonly used by therapists from many differing theoretical orientations (Kazantzis & Ronan, 2006). Research indicates that the use of tasks works to maximise therapeutic outcomes for clients (Scheel, Hanson, & Razzhavaikina, 2004). Many studies researching the use of between-session tasks in therapy have been
conducted in a cognitive behavioural therapy context and have largely relied on information given from therapists’ perspectives. There is also much discussion in the literature about client compliance with between-session tasks and ways to minimise barriers to engagement with these tasks (Dattilio, Kazantzis, Shinkfield, & Carr, 2011). There is little research, however, that explores, in depth, the client experience of between-session tasks in therapy. Finding out about how clients experience the process of between-session task negotiation would provide further understanding that would enable me to work effectively as a counsellor with clients in this part of the therapeutic process.

Within a solution-focused therapy approach, there is also limited research focusing on the specific process of between-session task co-construction. I was interested in the kinds of conversations that were had when tasks were negotiated, how clients receive tasks and engage with them, and how they experienced this process. Solution-focused therapists are good at finding out about clients’ experience and their reality, and many texts provide helpful guides and case study examples of between-session task discussions (De Jong & Berg, 2012; Hanton, 2011; Macdonald, 2011), however there is no practice-based research that explores the between-session task co-construction process and client experience, and none that focuses on adolescents in New Zealand schools. My research aimed to contribute to the literature about this topic.

In this practice-based research, I have used four cases to explore the ways between-session tasks are co-constructed as counsellor and client work together. I have also explored how clients have experienced this process. Through my study, I hoped to gain a greater understanding about what was working well for clients in this specific part of the therapeutic process. I hoped this knowledge would extend my understandings and skills as a solution-focused counsellor and would enable me to work more effectively with adolescents in the process of task co-construction.
Research Aims

My research aimed to explore and document the specific part of the therapeutic process relating to between-session task co-construction: to make evident what is happening between therapist and client and explore client and therapist experiences of the process (Strong & Massfeller, 2010). Giving attention to each part of this process and hearing about client experiences gives understandings and insights into ways of working that minimises barriers and maximises client engagement with between-session tasks. I hope to add to the knowledge base in the literature concerning this topic. Understandings gained may be useful for solution-focused counsellors working with adolescents, and may assist them to work effectively in this area, optimising client experience and engagement with between-session tasks and therefore maximising outcomes.

The Research Question

How are between-session tasks co-constructed and experienced by adolescents in solution-focused counselling sessions?

Supporting Questions

- How are between-session tasks talked about?
- How do clients respond in conversations about between-session tasks?
- How do clients engage with their between-session tasks between sessions?
- What are the tasks and how are they decided upon?
- What is the clients’ experience of this process?
- What is the counsellor’s experience of this process?

There are two foci: firstly, the interactive process that uses collaborative dialogue to co-construct between-session tasks and secondly, the experience of the client. The research question is broad allowing for the data to lead the analysis and the development of themes
that emerge. As the research progressed, I became more interested in the experience of clients rather than the actual dialogue that was taking place, although the two cannot be separated; it is the dialogue and the meaning that is made from it, that creates the experience that is of interest.

**Organisation of Thesis**

This thesis is organised into 11 chapters. Chapter One has introduced the topic, given the background and a rationale for the study. Chapter Two provides a review of the literature about the research topic and further develops the rationale for the study. Chapter Three describes the methodology used for the research and includes ethical considerations and discussions about trustworthiness of the study. Chapter Four describes the methods used in conducting the research, data collection and analysis, and outlines how the findings are presented. In Chapter Five, the four main themes that emerged from the data are briefly introduced.

Chapters Six, Seven, Eight and Nine report on the individual case studies and include a summary of findings from each case analysis. Research findings across cases are presented in Chapter Ten. Finally, Chapter Eleven begins with a discussion of the findings along-side the literature and is followed by some suggested implications for practice. The strengths and limitations of this study and further research directions are then considered before the conclusion.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Search terms: between-session tasks, homework tasks, out-of-session tasks, between-session, compliance, counselling, therapy, solution-focused, adolescents

Introduction

The first part of this literature review discusses relevant terms for my study: between-session tasks, co-construction, experience, adolescents and counselling. I then proceed to give a broad understanding of research relating to between-session tasks in psychology and psychotherapy, outlining how between-session tasks are used in most therapeutic approaches and are commonly viewed as enhancing therapeutic outcomes. The solution-focused brief therapy approach is described along with the rationale for using between-session tasks. Differences within the solution-focused approach are discussed and considerations of how to minimise barriers to engagement and whether follow-up on tasks is useful are noted. Research about client perspective is considered and finally the importance of a good therapeutic alliance is emphasised. To conclude, my research aim to explore the between-session task co-construction process and client experience is explained.

Between-Session Tasks

In the counselling context, between-session tasks or homework tasks are activities that clients do in their own time, outside of the counselling session, with the aim of taking steps towards their therapy goals, maximising the opportunity for change (de Shazer, 1988; Strong & Massfeller, 2010). Clients’ lives are lived outside of the counselling room, so agreeing on suitable between-session tasks extends the therapeutic benefits beyond the one hour consultation (Hanton, 2011; Manthei, 2005; Strong & Massfeller, 2010) and helps clients take steps “to make their life more satisfying” (De Jong & Berg, 2012, p. 124). Between-session tasks may vary in type depending on therapists’ particular theoretical approaches. In
solution-focused brief therapy, tasks or suggestions as they are often called, are usually either an action for clients to try or practise, or some thinking to notice (De Jong & Berg, 2012; Hanton, 2011). For this literature review I have used the terms between-session tasks and homework tasks interchangeably to be consistent with researchers’ use, however, throughout my research I have used the term between-session task or suggestion, as I consider that it sounds less prescriptive than homework which fits better with my personal philosophical approach. (Homework is most often prescribed by figures in authority which I do not want to assume to be.) Between-session tasks are discussed more fully later in this review.

**Co-construction**

In a broad sense, co-construction refers to the way people construct meaning through their social interactions with others (Burr, 1995; Creswell, 2014; De Jong & Berg, 2012). Burr (1995) explains that “when people talk to each other, the world gets constructed” (p. 7). These constructs of subjective reality are made by each individual within the social context of their culture, family, religion and personal experiences. In the context of solution-focused counselling, and for my purposes in this research, co-construction refers to how counsellor and client collaboratively explore or co-construct the client’s past, present and future life experiences with the aim of finding clues to ways that work for the client and solutions for their presenting issue. The use of dialogue and language as counsellor and client work together is essential for the creation of meaning and knowledge relating to the client’s story (Brott, 2001; De Jong & Berg, 2012). Past and present experiences are de-constructed with the aim of uncovering clients’ own resources and their past successes which are then amplified. Through this collaborative dialogue, fresh realisations and new possibilities are revealed or constructed and brighter futures for the client are created. Clients make new meanings from these co-constructive conversations and begin to see themselves as competent, with abilities that can be utilised to effect change in their situation. As clients
construct a different view of the world and themselves in it, possibilities for new ways of thinking or acting emerge, and ideas for trying something new between sessions are highlighted (De Jong & Berg, 2012).

Client Experience

In this research I wanted to understand how clients experienced our discussions in relation to between-session task co-construction and how they found receiving and engaging with their tasks. Experience is defined as “an event or occurrence which leaves an impression on someone” (Experience, n.d.-a) or “direct personal participation or observation; actual knowledge or contact” (Experience, n.d.-b). My clients participated in the counselling process and have expressed their impressions or experiences with regards to this research topic. Of course, personal experience can never be fully understood because researchers only have the information that participants have chosen to share with them and then that information is interpreted through the lens of the researcher (Abbis, 2005). Given these challenges I hope to have understood “as near as possible the experience from the participant’s perspective” (Fenton, 2012, p. 4).

Adolescents

Adolescence is the stage in a young person’s development when they transition from a dependent child to a more independent and self-sufficient young adult. This process often starts with puberty around 10-13 years old, ending anywhere between 18-25 years old (Gray, 2011; Hanley, Humphrey, & Lennie, 2012). This stage is characterised by rapid physical, cognitive, behavioural and emotional developmental changes (Steinberg, 2005). There is a marked improvement in reasoning, information processing and expertise during early adolescence. Adolescents have often been seen as being poor decision-makers, however research suggests that they have good cognitive processes but there are other factors such as
feelings and social influences that affect their behaviours which have often led to risk-taking, impulsivity and a lack of self-regulation (Steinberg, 2007).

In addition to their changing biological processes, adolescents face a multitude of other stressors such as academic pressures and interpersonal relationships, while at the same time discovering their sense of identity and self worth, and their place in the world. For some, personal circumstances such as unstable family life combine to make adolescence a challenging time. In the past, adolescents may have had extended families and neighbourhood communities to relate to and find support in, however, for many, these connections are limited with smaller family units often living away from relatives in larger, less personal communities. It is unsurprising that there are many adolescents in need of counselling support as they navigate their course from childhood to adulthood (Hanley et al., 2012).

Zimmerman and Cleary (2006) report on the usefulness of goal setting, strategy implementation, self-monitoring and self-evaluation for adolescent self-regulation and improvement in academic areas. As adolescents develop their ability to self-regulate this in turn affects their self-confidence. Bandura (as cited in Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006) reports that personal accomplishment is a strong influencer of individual self-efficacy. Solution-focused counselling uses these same strategies to assist adolescent clients towards reaching their goals in many areas of life, not just academic areas. A solution-focused approach is effective for use with adolescents as it helps them to think through their concerns in a logical way. In the words of a young ten year old client, “We have the answers – we just need someone to help bring them to the front of our head” (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004, p. 49). Young people are empowered as they learn that they have the strengths and abilities to make changes in their situation (Milner & Bateman, 2011). Furthermore, Lethem (2002) asserts that a solution-focused approach works well with young people. She suggests that the accepting, client-centred approach and problem-free talking where young people can see that
there are many areas in their lives that are working well, is beneficial and instils hope for both young people and therapists.

**Counselling**

Counselling is a therapeutic process where the counsellor works with a client, assisting them in understanding themselves and their relationships with others, helping them to realise their own strengths that they can use to finding solutions or change in their life (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2014). In New Zealand, high school students in need of support have free access to counsellors within their schools. This current research was conducted in a New Zealand high school setting. Throughout this study, I have used the words therapy (therapist) and counselling (counsellor) interchangeably to be inclusive to all those in this kind of helping profession.

**Between-Session Tasks in Psychology and Psychotherapy.**

There is limited research in solution-focused literature investigating how between-session tasks are co-constructed with clients and the client experience of this process. Therefore, I have initially given a broader overview of what the literature says about between-session tasks within psychology and psychotherapy in general.

Between-session tasks are used to a greater or lesser degree within most therapeutic practices regardless of theoretical orientation (Dattilio et al., 2011; Kazantzis & Deane, 1999; Kazantzis & Ronan, 2006; Scheel et al., 2004). In their 2010 study, Kazantzis & Dattilio surveyed 827 psychologists with the aim of assessing their views and practices regarding homework tasks. Practitioners’ responses varied according to their theoretical orientation. Cognitive-behavioural therapists viewed tasks as being very important and used them frequently, whereas psychodynamic therapists rated tasks as being “somewhat” or “moderately” important (p.758). The data here suggests that some form of homework may be
common to most therapeutic approaches. Kazantzis and Ronan (2006) support this, asserting that numerous approaches including: systemic, client-centred, solution-focused, marital and family, and experiential therapies all utilise homework tasks to extend therapeutic benefits. Dattilio et al. (2011) also found in their study, investigating 226 couples and family therapists’ use of homework, that therapists from a variety of orientations used homework to the same degree as the cognitive behavioural therapists, indicating that homework is indeed common amongst many therapeutic approaches. Much of the empirical research relating to homework in therapy is within a behavioural and cognitive-behavioural therapy context (Kazantzis & L'Abate, 2007). There is a need therefore for research within other approaches to provide a broader perspective and understanding of this homework process. My research explores the use of homework within a solution-focused counselling context which adds a different perspective to the current literature.

There is general consensus within the literature that between-session tasks are useful for clients and work towards maximising therapeutic outcomes (Kazantzis & L'Abate, 2007; Kazantzis, Whittington, & Dattilio, 2010; Scheel et al., 2004). Kazantzis et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of 27 cognitive and behavioural therapy studies investigating the effects of homework on therapeutic outcomes and the relationship between homework compliance and outcomes. The analysis suggests that therapeutic outcomes were greater in therapies that used homework tasks than those that did not. This is supported by similar findings from an earlier meta-analysis conducted by Kazantzis, Deane, and Ronan (2000) using the same group of studies.

Typically much of the discussion in the current research has been concerned with the content of tasks, client compliance and outcome differences (Kazantzis & L'Abate, 2007; Strong & Massfeller, 2010), with many studies using surveys to assess therapists’ use of homework in therapy and their experience of clients’ compliance. However, there has been
limited research investigating the process of task negotiation and the strategies that therapists might use to help clients engage with between-session tasks (Kazantzis & Dattilio, 2010; Kazantzis & L'Abate, 2007; Scheel et al., 2004). Furthermore, there are few studies conducted within approaches other than cognitive behavioural therapy (Kazantzis & Ronan, 2006) and few that investigate clients’ experiences of between-session tasks and the interactive process that happens between client and counsellor when tasks are agreed upon. It is my view that if therapists want to understand how best to encourage clients to engage with between-session tasks, it would be most useful to ask the clients about their experiences: what works for them and what does not work for them. My research addresses this gap in the literature by exploring clients’ experiences of between-session task discussions.

As mentioned, compliance of clients to do their homework is much discussed in the literature (Detweiler-Bedell & Whisman, 1999; Kazantzis, Deane, & Ronan, 2004; Kazantzis & L'Abate, 2007; Scheel et al., 2004), with researchers reporting that compliance with homework tasks is a good predictor of positive therapeutic outcomes (Burns & Auerbach, 1992; Kazantzis et al., 2000). Much of the discussion in the literature is focused around assessing the quantity and quality of client compliance (Kazantzis et al., 2004; Kazantzis & L'Abate, 2007). What is most important to know however, is how to work with clients to maximise their engagement with homework as a means to enhance outcomes (Detweiler-Bedell & Whisman, 1999; Kazantzis & L'Abate, 2007).

Detweiler and Whisman (1999) reviewed cognitive therapy studies with depressed clients, exploring homework use and adherence. They suggested that barriers to between-session task completion may be associated with: the client; with task suitability; the therapist; or the environment of the client (for example, practical barriers). These are helpful points for therapists to consider when discussing homework with clients. Kazantzis et al. (2004) also reviewed 32 studies that assessed compliance with homework tasks. They further developed
Detweiler and Whisman’s (1999) ideas about reducing barriers to homework compliance suggesting that when integrating homework into therapy, consideration should be given to numerous client factors, therapist factors and task characteristics. Kazantzis et al. (2004) also advise that therapists involve clients in collaborative discussions when designing task details.

Understandings of clients’ experiences may provide clues for therapists about what ways of working will enhance client engagement with tasks. However, most research mentioned has relied largely on therapist perceptions which though helpful, only provide one side of the story. In my study I explore the process of co-constructing between-session tasks and the client experience of this process with the aim of finding optimal ways of working that will maximise client engagement with between-session tasks and therapy outcomes.

Many therapists use the term compliance, however in my research I prefer to use the word engagement which has a sense of willingness and collaboration attached to it; this is more consistent with a client-led, solution-focused approach. The word compliance seems to be suggestive of a power difference with the sense that a therapist will know what is best for their client and will be directive with tasks and therefore be looking for compliance.

In a useful study investigating the way therapists assigned homework, Detweiler-Bedell and Whisman (2005) coded aspects of discussions between therapists and clients during the homework assigning and reviewing part of the therapeutic process. Their aim was to find ways that contribute to better outcomes for clients. Results suggest that improved treatment outcomes were associated with: therapists setting specific, concrete goals and discussing barriers to homework completion with less involved clients; task characteristics such as using written reminders; and client involvement in the discussion. Researchers found that clients who had a higher level of involvement with the homework assigning process achieved better therapeutic outcomes. These findings provide helpful guidance for therapists
wanting to encourage clients to engage with tasks between sessions so that therapeutic outcomes will be maximised. Future studies that explore client perceptions of homework discussions would add extra understanding to this process. This current study adds to the literature in that it captures the clients’ experiences of how between-session tasks are talked about in a solution-focused counselling context.

Neimeyer, Kazantzis, Kassler, Baker, and Fletcher (2008) found that patients’ self-report about their willingness to engage with tasks was useful in understanding between-session task compliance and positive therapeutic outcomes. Patients’ own assessment of their motivation to engage with homework tasks positively related to their engagement with tasks, skill acquisition and consequently improved symptoms. Researchers found that patient and observer assessments were highly correlated which indicated that patient report can be reliable and therefore very useful for therapists and researchers to note. This study highlights the usefulness of finding out about clients’ perspectives. With regard to this current study, there is learning to be gained from taking an in-depth look into clients’ experiences of task negotiations, not just therapist experiences.

There is very limited research about the specifics of between-session task negotiations within therapy sessions. Some suggestions of things to consider have been made by Detweiler-Bedell and Whisman (2005) and Kazantzis et al. (2004) though none have been tested by research. Scheel et al. (2004) investigated the process of recommending homework in psychotherapy with the aim of proposing a theoretical model of this process. They accessed 37 texts from a variety of approaches that focused on some aspect of the homework recommendation process: 16 empirical articles, 14 conceptual articles and 7 textbooks. Researchers reviewed therapists’ delivery, client acceptability and factors that affect compliance with tasks. From their findings, Scheel et al. (2004) proposed a useful, six-phase model for the process of homework recommendation. Strategies in this model include:
collaborative client-therapist formulation; therapist delivery of homework using explicit
detail, rationale, client beliefs, strengths and abilities, and providing written tasks; client
receipt with consideration to any barriers and confidence; client implementation between
sessions; therapist follow-up about homework experience in the next session; and clients’
report on their homework experience. This model is not designed to be prescriptive, and
though untested, provides helpful guidelines and common factors to be considered when
talking about homework with clients. More recently, Nelson, Castonguay, and Barwick
(2007) have identified common principles or guidelines for effective use of homework in
therapy from their study of different ways therapists of differing theoretical orientations use
homework with clients. These helpful guidelines are similar to, and support the suggestions
of Scheel et al. (2004).

In one of the few qualitative studies found, Strong and Massfeller (2010) explored
how therapists, using social constructionist approaches to counselling, talked about
homework tasks, aiming to “heighten sensitivity to the attending and responding process
through which client and counsellor together and moment by moment create between-session
tasks between them” (p. 15). Twelve volunteer ‘clients’ received a single therapy session
with a trained counsellor in a non-clinical, research-contrived setting. Using conversation
analysis, researchers analysed the 12 passages of dialogue that related to homework task
negotiation between counsellors and clients. They also received feedback from clients and
counsellors on their retrospective experience of parts of their homework dialogue. From their
findings, Strong and Massfeller (2010) suggest five considerations for therapists involved in
between-session task discussions including things such as: tailoring to client goals,
incorporating client resources, considering client preferences and life style; and inviting
clients into homework discussions. These findings give support to the guidelines for
homework recommendation suggested by Scheel et al. (2004) and Nelson et al. (2007). This
study was useful in that it made evident the dialogues between counsellor and client as homework tasks were negotiated, and also added the client’s experience of these homework discussions. Research involving multiple sessions with clients in authentic therapy settings is necessary to create a fuller picture of what is happening in this between-session process as it shows not only what is talked about within a session, but also what happens between sessions: what engagement and change takes place for the client. In this current study, I work with clients over multiple sessions, which enables me to observe the process that happens during each session and also between consecutive sessions. Clients’ experiences of talking about tasks during counselling sessions and their experience of engaging with tasks between sessions are explored.

In summary, it is clear that homework tasks are commonly used by therapists using a variety of different approaches and that the use of homework tasks in therapy maximises therapeutic outcomes. Furthermore, compliance with tasks is a good predictor of positive outcomes. Researchers and practitioners have suggested helpful ways to integrate homework into therapy with the aim of minimising any barriers and increasing client engagement with tasks. Most studies however, have been conducted within a cognitive-behavioural therapy context and have largely explored therapist perceptions not client perspectives. Furthermore, no studies have focused on adolescent clients. My study contributes to the literature in that it explores the experience of adolescent clients during the homework negotiation process within a solution-focused approach in an authentic counselling setting. It is also conducted over a number of sessions enabling me to observe and talk about what happens for the clients between-sessions as well as within sessions.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

Solution-focused brief therapy is a strengths based approach developed in the 1980s by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and their colleagues. de Shazer and Berg ascribed to the
post-modernist view that people’s realities are subjective and influenced by their own social context of culture, family, religion and life experiences (Jones-Smith, 2012). Knowledge and meaning is seen to be constructed by the individual and affected by his or her context (Lichtman, 2013). This social constructionist viewpoint underpins the solution-focused approach and is discussed further in the methodology section of this report (Chapter Three).

Solution-focused brief therapists aim to help people find solutions or positive change in their situation. They see people as competent and able to solve their own problems in the context of their life using their own capabilities and resources. Excessive problem talk is seen to be unnecessary; instead, therapists focus more on helping clients to clearly articulate their goals and to take small steps towards them. This future focused approach helps clients explore how life will be when the problem is not there (Jones-Smith, 2012). Therapists are non-judgmental and accepting of clients and do not assume an expert role. They see the clients as experts in their own lives and take a stance of curiosity to draw clients out, to enable them to explore their strengths and build their own solutions. A typical solution-focused counselling session may include: a description of the problem; developing specific goals; finding exceptions when the client has managed better or the problem was not there; finding client strengths and resources; agreeing on a between-session task designed to help the client take small steps towards their goals; and scaling progress. Solution-focused therapists look for what is working and encourage clients to do more of it (De Jong & Berg, 2012). Therapists use a language of expectancy which helps build vision and hope for the client. They work to affirm the client’s own agency to effect positive change.

There are a number of solution-focused tenets that guide practitioners using this approach. These include: if it works, do more of it; if it ain’t broke don’t fix it; if it isn’t working do something different; small steps lead to big changes; solutions fit the person not the problem; the solution is not necessarily related to the problem; no problem happens all the
time – there are always exceptions; the language of solution-building is different from the language used to describe a problem; and the future is creatable (Connie, 2009). More detail of the solution-focused counselling process and techniques used in my research can be found in the procedures section of this report (Chapter Four).

**Between-session tasks in solution-focused counselling.** Solution-focused practitioners have reported on the process of between-session task co-construction often using examples of cases they have worked with (De Jong & Berg, 2012; de Shazer et al., 2007; Hanton, 2011; Quick, 2012). These examples, found in solution-focused texts, provide insight into ways between-session tasks can be talked about with clients. The time spent outside the counselling room is the client’s real life, so therapists consider it is useful to encourage them to do something in that time that will help them take small steps towards their goals (Hanton, 2011). These tasks can be specific actions or simple noticing or thinking tasks, depending on their suitability for the client. Whatever the task, doing something between-sessions is likely to maximise therapeutic outcomes (Hanton, 2011; Macdonald, 2011). In solution-focused therapy, tasks are not seen as a requirement for change and are not required by therapists as they are in some other models such as cognitive behavioural therapy (Trepper et al., 2013). Tasks are suggestions that clients can choose to do or not (Lipchik, 2014). Nevertheless, most solution-focused therapists use tasks with the aim of extending therapeutic benefits into clients’ everyday lives.

The usefulness of between-session tasks for clients in solution-focused therapy is reported by Simon and Nelson (2004) who used qualitative methods to explore clients’ experiences of different aspects of their solution-focused therapy. The researchers’ aim was to find out what things were helpful for clients and what could have been more helpful. Sixty-one out of 69 clients who had reached their goals found that between-session suggestions were helpful. Two clients reported tasks were sometimes helpful and six clients reported that
they were unhelpful. Interestingly, in the description of the procedures, Simon and Nelson (2004) indicated that the therapists suggested the tasks and not the clients; perhaps clients who found tasks unhelpful may have needed more opportunity to design their own tasks which may have increased their usefulness. Nevertheless, it is clear from this study that clients who had achieved positive outcomes found that between-session tasks were helpful.

In solution-focused counselling there is a variety of ways in which therapists deliver or negotiate between-session tasks with their clients. Tasks can be delivered as interventions issued as therapist suggestions, or be collaboratively negotiated between therapist and client (Sharry, Madden, & Darmody, 2012), or be suggested by the client themselves (Trepper et al., 2013). This is different to some cognitive behavioural approaches where homework has traditionally been assigned by the therapist for the client to carry out between sessions (de Shazer et al., 2007; Hanton, 2011; Quick, 2012; Trepper et al., 2013), though this appears to be changing as is indicated by the recommendations for integrating homework into therapy discussed earlier in this review (Scheel et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2007). De Jong and Berg (2012) advise that therapists should give suggestions to clients based on information about client goals, exceptions and strengths that have been gathered during the counselling session. They also advise that using the client’s own language is the most effective way of communicating these suggestions. The rationale for this is that client ideas are familiar and fit within the context of their lives, increasing the likelihood of engagement with some activity between sessions. This aligns with a key solution-focused philosophy that says, “what emanates from the client is better than if it were to come from the therapist” (de Shazer et al., 2007, p. 11). Lipchik (2014) supports this view asserting that tasks must be fitted to the clients (p. 70).

O’Connell (2012) however, reports that there has been a move away from therapists giving task suggestions and a move towards supporting clients to design their own tasks. He
reports that therapists use broader and less specific suggestions, encouraging clients to keep
doing what is working and to look for things that they want to continue in their lives. This
move is supported by Lipchik (2002), who suggests that task giving as an intervention is not
consistent with the collaborative, ‘client-led’ nature of the solution-focused approach and
along with many other therapists prefers to call tasks suggestions or experiments that should
not be given but rather collaboratively agreed upon (Hanton, 2011; Macdonald, 2011; Ratner,
George, & Iveson, 2012). Hanton (2011) considers that suggestions should be talked about as
‘experiments’ for clients to try as they are more able to be accepted or rejected by clients if
they do not find them appropriate. Macdonald (2011) and Hanton (2011) consider that
therapist suggestions should only be made when clients are unable to think of one for
themselves, and, if this is the case, suggestions should always relate to something clients have
mentioned during the session: client goals or previous successes - something that has worked
for them before.

There are some clients however, who respond well to authority and therapist directed
tasks (O'Connell, 2012). Macdonald (2011) supports this view noting that some clients expect
therapists to give advice, so suggesting tasks for them is appropriate and helps to build the
therapeutic alliance. For example, Blakeslee and Jordan (2013) report that American Indian
clients expect therapists to be more directive, therefore, therapist assigned tasks are more
appropriate than client designed tasks. Though this may seem inconsistent with client-led
therapy, if it benefits the client within their cultural context, it may be best practice.

There is no solution-focused research investigating clients’ experiences of task
suggesting. In my research, I was interested in how adolescent clients experienced this; did it
make any difference to them who suggested the task – the counsellor or the client? My study
investigates ways tasks can be talked about with clients. I look at what tasks are agreed upon,
who suggests tasks and the clients’ experience of this process with the aim of understanding
what may be an optimal approach. I use a collaborative approach to between-session task co-
construction and in the first instance invite clients to offer any suggestions they have for a
between-session task that would be helpful.

Client engagement with tasks and consequently therapeutic outcomes are influenced
by the way tasks are delivered and their suitability for the client (Trepper et al., 2013). To
minimise barriers to task engagement it is therefore important that between-session tasks are
tailored to suit individual clients: both in the way they are delivered and in the type of task.
Quick (2012) asserts that lack of engagement with between-session tasks may indeed be
because the therapist’s interventions have not matched the client’s situation or their readiness
for change. If clients design their own task it reduces any natural tendencies of resistance to
therapist suggested interventions. Clients are more likely to assign themselves tasks they can
manage and be successful at, as they are experts in their own lives not the therapist (Hanton,
2011). Having clients design tasks will also reduce the risk of clients feeling that they have
failed if they did not do the therapist’s suggestion. Throughout my research I use a
collaborative style and endeavour to help clients select tasks that are appropriate and
manageable for them.

Solution-focused therapists often use scales when asking clients about how motivated
or confident they are that they can do their between-session task (De Jong & Berg, 2012;
Hanton, 2011; Sharry et al., 2012). It is helpful to know how motivated clients are to try new
ideas or work on something that has worked in the past. If confidence is low it gives
opportunity for counsellors to explore reasons and uncover new information (De Jong &
Berg, 2012; Sharry et al., 2012) and if necessary to modify tasks so that they are more
attainable. In this research scales have been used to gauge clients’ confidence to engage with
their between-session tasks.
Following up on task completion is generally not advised in solution-focused counselling (De Jong & Berg, 2012; Hanton, 2011; Quick, 2012). De Jong and Berg (2012) view that it is the client’s own choice to follow through with therapist suggestions and consider that asking about them may put clients in an awkward position if they did not engage with their between-session task. Hanton (2011) relates how on occasion people have stopped coming to counselling because they did not want to let the therapist down or they lied about the between-session task. If a task is not engaged with, it is assumed by solution-focused therapists that the task was not useful or that something prevented the client from doing it, for example illness, or it was not relevant within the time period between sessions (Trepper et al., 2013). Trepper et al. (2013) suggest that inquiring about how a task went is appropriate. If a client used the task, there is opportunity to compliment and amplify, and if they did not use the task, Trepper et al. (2013) advise that therapists should move onto something else with the knowledge that there must have been something that got in the way.

Herrero de Vega and Beyebach (2004) found that deconstructing clients’ initial reports of no improvement led to 37 percent of these clients recognising that there had actually been some improvement (de Shazer, 1988). This finding may be applied to reports of no success with tasks. If tasks are not engaged with, perhaps there is merit in deconstructing client’s reports before moving on to something else. It may be that, as in this study, clients could recognise some success. Quick (2012) asserts that whatever the response to the between-session task is, it always provides useful information about the client and their issue. My research adds to the literature by exploring whether following up on between-session tasks is useful for the therapeutic process or not: looking from both my counsellor perspective and from the client perspective.

In the solution-focused approach between-session tasks are agreed upon at the end of the session just after the break (De Jong & Berg, 2012). The break is a pause in proceedings
where the therapist will either leave the room or have a few moments silence to reflect on what has been said and to prepare some useful feedback for the client. Like Hanton (2011), I prefer to stay in the room with my adolescent clients as it feels more natural to me. In the feedback, client strengths and resources identified in the session are complimented, successes are recalled and following this, the client’s specific goal is reiterated before a between-session task is decided upon. This feedback works to affirm and validate clients which creates a positive frame promoting personal agency (Jones-Smith, 2012; Trepper et al., 2008), increasing the likelihood that clients will feel confident to continue doing what is working or to try something new that they had thought about during the session.

In summary, solution-focused practitioners encourage clients to do something between sessions that will help them take small steps towards their therapy goals. The process of deciding on appropriate tasks is collaborative with between-session tasks usually emerging from co-constructive conversations during the counselling session. In my research I work collaboratively with clients as we co-construct between-session tasks. I observe what is happening as we worked together and most importantly, explore clients’ experiences of this process with the aim of developing optimal ways of working that will increase client engagement with doing something between sessions and therefore maximising therapeutic outcomes. My research makes explicit different aspects of this between-session task process when working with adolescents.

**Client Perspectives and Perceptions**

Until recently there has been limited research investigating how clients perceive and make sense of their counselling experience (Manthei, 2005). Most studies note therapist perceptions and observations but fail to ask the person who they are trying to help how it is for them. Research has shown that client and counsellor views often differ (Manthei, 2005; Metcalf & Thomas, 1994; Scheel et al., 2004), so it is therefore important that we find out
both sides of the story. There have been some studies using a solution-focused approach that have looked broadly at clients’ experiences of solution-focused counselling (Beyebach, 2014; Carr, Smith, & Simm, 2014; Manthei, 2005; Metcalf & Thomas, 1994; Odell, Butler, & Dielman, 2005; Simon & Nelson, 2004). These studies have highlighted aspects that are helpful and unhelpful in solution-focused counselling. There have, however been no studies that have looked specifically at the process of between-session task discussions and client experience. Bohart and Tallman (1999) write that the “active efforts of clients are responsible for making psychotherapy work”. It would be useful therefore for research to investigate clients’ views so that therapists can understand more clearly how they can assist clients in their change process. Solution-focused counsellors prioritise attending to clients’ contexts and experiences so research investigating clients’ perspectives is a natural progression from this approach (Simon & Nelson, 2004). Finding out what works best for each client will mean therapists can assist them in the best way possible: an aim of this current study.

**Therapeutic Alliance**

A strong therapeutic relationship has been demonstrated to be essential for successful outcomes (Duncan et al., 2004; Elliot & Williams, 2003). The “client perceptions of the relationship [with a counsellor] are the most consistent predictor of improvement” (Manthei, 2005, p.2), not the therapist’s perception (Metcalf, 1996). Scheel et al. (2004) also note that clients are more likely to accept homework when they see therapists in a positive light: as experts, as trustworthy and as interpersonally attractive. This view was supported in Simon and Nelson’s research (2004) where participants found the most useful aspects of their solution-focused counselling was the therapeutic approach and “a positive relationship with the therapist” (p. 44).

In a study of solution-focused counselling sessions, Balin (as cited in Beyebach, 2014) examined the therapeutic interactions between clients and counsellors as tasks were
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assigned. She found that clients were less likely to carry out homework tasks when there had been more conflictive interactions between counsellor and client. These findings suggest that a well-functioning therapeutic relationship will very likely result in better client engagement with between-session tasks and subsequently better therapeutic outcomes. Duncan et al. (2004) assert that a strong alliance will be reflected in the way that counsellors and clients jointly work together to co-construct suitable interventions that match the client’s view of change – not the counsellors. Furthermore, Lambert and Barley (2001) suggest that the main curative component in counselling is that of a caring, empathetic, non-judgmental therapeutic relationship where clients feel listened to, respected and affirmed. Clients are not as concerned about the actual approach and techniques used by a therapist, but rate the relationship with the therapist as very important (Elliot & Williams, 2003). This is especially relevant for adolescents, who Metcalf (2008) considers, seek acceptance and validation which is given within an effective therapeutic relationship. With this in mind, in all my counselling, I prioritise the building of a trusting and affirming relationship with each client.

Summary of the Literature

This literature review has established that between-session tasks are helpful for clients and serve to maximise therapeutic outcomes. Engagement with tasks is a predictor of positive therapeutic outcomes, therefore minimising barriers to task completion is seen to be an important consideration. There is general agreement about the importance of therapists talking about tasks in a way that maximises client engagement, and it is my view that finding the client perspective will give greater understanding about this process. Though there are many case examples from solution-focused practitioners, there is no research investigating the specific process of between-session task co-construction and clients’ experiences using a solution-focused approach.
This study therefore aims to contribute to the literature by exploring how between-session tasks are co-constructed through the collaborative co-constructive conversations between counsellor and client in solution-focused counselling sessions. The counselling is conducted in a New Zealand high-school setting with adolescent clients. Four cases are studied and thematically analysed. I have explored each conversation where between-session tasks are talked about: the preceding co-constructive discussions as well as the conversations had in subsequent sessions regarding clients’ experiences of engaging or not with between-session tasks. I have also gathered clients’ perspectives about their experience of these conversations and about how useful or appropriate they perceived their tasks to be in helping them move towards their goals. Understandings gained about clients’ own unique preferences are of benefit to my own practice and may provide insights for counsellors about this important part of the therapy process.
CHAPTER THREE
Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss a number of methodological frameworks which were considered for my research exploring between-session task co-construction and client experience in solution-focused counselling sessions with adolescents. The qualitative paradigm and methodologies that I ultimately chose to use are introduced, along with the rationale for my choice. Following this, an explanation of social constructionism, the theoretical orientation underpinning qualitative research philosophy, solution-focused counselling, as well as my own personal worldview, is given. The case study design and the interpretive approach I used during my research and analysis is discussed, and my dual role as a researcher and a participant-counsellor in this practice-based research is explained and my assumptions are declared. Details about the solution-focused approach I used in counselling are presented, and finally, ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the study are considered. My research title states the focus of this research:

Homework: An exploration into how between-session tasks are co-constructed and experienced by adolescents in solution-focused counselling sessions.

As a solution-focused counsellor working with adolescents in high school, I was curious to know more about what works and what does not seem to work for students in this specific part of our solution-focused counselling sessions: between-session task conversations. I was wanting to understand about the process that was happening within our sessions, and, I was wanting to understand client experience of this process as well as observe and develop my own practice as a result of my reflections. I needed to choose a framework that allowed me to explore both process and client experience. A number of approaches were considered.
Firstly, I considered the positivist approach which is underpinned by an objectivist worldview. Objectivists consider that meaning and truth exist apart from any human consciousness and that understandings of objective truth can be uncovered through careful research (Crotty, 1998; Davidson, Tolich, & Education, 1999). Positivists therefore “see social science as an organized method for combining deductive logic with precise empirical observations of individual behavior” (as cited in Neuman, Davidson et al., 1999, p. 26). They try to discover causal laws that can be used to predict human behaviour. In this approach researchers are seen to be neutral. They will often employ the use of careful observations, of surveys or measures and scales to “describe an objective reality” (Crotty, 1998; Lichtman, 2010, p. 7). In my research I could not be objective or neutral because I was involved in the process and would be an influential participant. This positivist approach did not fit with my social constructionist view that meanings and truth differ for each person depending on their own reality and experience of life. For example, the meaning of ‘success’ will be different for each individual and cannot be objectively defined. As a counsellor, school teacher and a parent, I see how each person receives and interprets each conversation or event slightly differently depending on their unique person which is shaped and developed by their own interactions and experiences in life. I proceeded to look into interpretivist methodologies that are underpinned by the theoretical perspective of social constructionism.

Phenomenology “is based on description and understanding of the lived experience of one or more individuals who have undergone a particular experience” (Lichtman, 2010, p. 89). This approach aims to “reduce the experiences of persons with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007, p. 252). A phenomenological approach would allow me to study and “understand the lived experiences” (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 241) of my adolescent clients with regard to the phenomenon of between-session tasks in solution-focused counselling sessions (Creswell,
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2013; Lichtman, 2010). Interviews and observations would enable me to find out much about their experience, however, this approach would not allow me to explore the interactive process of between-session task co-construction, nor would I be able to be a participant in the process. Client experience would give valuable information but there was more that I was looking to investigate.

I also considered using conversation analysis (Ten Have, 2007) because I was interested in the dialogue, between counsellor and client, as between-session tasks were talked about. Conversational analysis “is a method that focuses on how speakers conversationally accomplish social outcomes through dialogue” (Strong & Massfeller, 2010, p. 17). Exploring what people say and do as they talk their way forward in their conversations about homework would enable me to shed light on useful aspects of conversations between counsellor and client. I decided however, that using this specific method to record dialogues was not necessary for my purposes and that I would be able to adequately examine transcribed conversations without using conversation analysis. I also wanted to explore the client’s experiences of task co-construction and my counsellor experience and reflections on the process which could not be fully recorded using conversation analysis. I needed a methodological framework that allowed me to explore between-session task discussions and client experiences while at the same time also allowing me, as the researcher/counsellor, to reflect on my practice and make adjustments as needed as the research progressed.

My practice-based research required a more holistic investigation. A case study design provided the most suitable framework for my study as it allowed me to explore both the process of between-session task co-construction as well as client experience. Using this design enabled me to be the researcher and an active participant-counsellor in the process. I was able to examine counsellor and client conversations and interactions, as well as the clients’ experiences of between-session task discussions. As a result, some findings emerged
from the conversations while others emerged from the clients’ experiences of the conversations and others from their experiences of engaging with tasks between sessions. This case-study design is discussed more fully later in this chapter.

**Qualitative Research**

A qualitative research approach provided the most suitable framework for my study investigating the co-construction of between-session tasks and clients’ experience of this process. The view that people’s language, meanings and realities are socially constructed, underpins the theoretical perspective of qualitative methodology (Burr, 1995; Crotty, 1998). Qualitative research is primarily reliant on human perceptions and understandings and is conducted in a social setting where individuals’ unique experiences are investigated (Stake, 2010). Participants’ paradigms, that is, what the world looks and feels like from the participants’ perspectives and how they create meaning from it are investigated. ‘What’ and ‘How’ questions are asked by the researcher for the purpose of gaining understandings and knowledge about individuals’ constructed experiences. The main characteristics of qualitative research as outlined by Creswell (2014) include:

- Naturalistic - conducted in participants’ natural settings, with them interacting as they normally do
- Researcher is a key instrument
- Descriptive data: words, writing, pictures
- Concerned with process: how and what questions
- Inductive: using the data to gain understandings of phenomena and interactions
- Concerned with meaning: how participants make sense of their experience
- Reflexivity: the inquirer reflects on how their role influences the study
- Holistic: development of a complex, multi-perspective picture
Qualitative methods provide systematic ways to collect data and to rigorously analyse and interpret it. “Qualitative research does not seek to generalise to the whole population but to provide a precise (or valid) description of what people said or did in a particular location” (Davidson et al., 1999, p. 34). The data collected through many sources such as observations, in-depth interviews, written accounts, documents or drawings, is ‘thick’ and richly descriptive of participants’ experiences, interactions, conversations and behaviours. The process is inductive, requiring researchers to continually review, adjust and reflect on their perceptions and findings while the research is taking place. It is a subjective process, not objective, with the researcher being a participant in the research as well. Researchers are like detectives looking from every angle for clues, endeavouring to reconstruct an accurate presentation. It is an evolving, inductive process that cannot be directed with hypotheses, theories, predictions and assumptions. Concepts, themes and theories “emerge from the bottom up…from many disparate pieces of collected evidence that are interconnected” (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007, p. 6), with all findings being supported by the data. In this research project I have explored what was being said and done and experienced in relation to between-session tasks within the context of solution-focused counselling sessions with adolescents.

Case Study Design

A descriptive, multiple-case study design was the best fit for my research methodology. This design allowed me to explore both the process and the participants in the process. Lichtman (2010, p. 81) writes that “instead of focusing on one individual, a case often is identified as a particular program, or project, or setting”. Each case unit for my study comprised of both myself as the participant-counsellor and the participant-client engaging in a series of solution-focused counselling sessions. The case unit was that part of the process that related to between-session task negotiation and discussions, that is, not the whole solution-focused counselling session, although, the two cannot really be separated. Four cases
were examined in depth and provided detailed descriptions of the process and the experience of both counsellor and client in relation to between-session tasks. Using four case studies enabled me to explore within and between cases in a similar range. My research does not intend to produce a theory or an argument to reflect all others of similar characteristics but rather to give an in-depth perspective and understanding of these four cases within this same range.

**An Interpretive Approach**

Interpretivism also recognises that individuals’ realities are socially constructed as they interact within their cultural, historical and personal contexts (Davidson et al., 1999). Each person’s perspective and experience of reality is subjective. This subjectivity applies to both researcher and participants and is acknowledged in this study. I used an interpretive approach as I collected and analysed data, reflecting on the process throughout. Researchers as participants in the research will, and are expected to, influence the research: the collection and interpretation of data. It is impossible not to. Constant, conscious self-reflection on the part of myself as the researcher was necessary, acknowledging any potential influence I may have had on the study (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Using an interpretivist approach I have sought to explore phenomena that relate to my research topic, making sense of it, interpreting it and the meaning that participants are making within the process. As expected in an interpretive approach, the course of the research altered and emerged more fully and precisely as the research process proceeded and reflections were made (Lofland, 2006) by myself as the participant researcher. I developed different ways of asking questions and became more in-tune to clients’ progress and engagement with their between-session tasks as the research progressed.
**Practice-Based Research**

I used my own practice as a counsellor to explore what was happening as between-session tasks were co-constructed and experienced by my clients. Through participating and observing in the counselling sessions I was able to see and feel and analytically articulate the nature of the discussions and experiences for both myself as the counsellor and for the client (Lofland, 2006). As I counselled and researched, I developed greater understandings about ways that work and ways that do not work (Wheeler, 2014). Adjustments to the way I worked were made along the way as I reflected on each case and tried different ways of approaching between-session task conversations. I consider that I have become a more skilled practitioner with greater understandings about the process of between-session task negotiation and solution-focused counselling in general as a result of this reflective, research process (Lichtman, 2013).

**The researcher.** I am currently a student counsellor having nearly completed my Master of Counselling at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Prior to entering the masters’ programme I had many years of experience as a primary school teacher. My counselling practice, working with adolescents, has been in local high schools. I have a strong allegiance to the solution-focused approach to counselling, however, I utilise skills and techniques from other approaches as needed.

**Constructionism.** I approached my research with the conceptual framework of constructionism: that is, the view that individuals construct their own meaning and unique reality as they interact with the world (Crotty, 1998). “In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon (p. 9). It is through this constructionist lens that I view myself, others and consequently all interpretations and experiences of social interactions throughout the research process.
Researcher assumptions. Prior to the research commencement I had assumptions that between-session tasks were helpful, and that what comes from the client as a suggestion may be more appropriate for them to try. I considered that clients are more likely to choose a task that is manageable for them in their situation and that in choosing their own task, any potential resistance to counsellor directives would be minimised. Being aware of these assumptions, I maintained openness to what I might observe both in my practice and in the clients’ responses and experience. I endeavoured to hold back my assumptions so that I did not just see and hear what I was expecting, but instead, kept an open mind and an attitude of curiosity as to how between-session tasks might be talked about and experienced by clients.

Researcher reflexivity. The researcher must acknowledge their own views and interpretations throughout the study, but especially during the analysis and write up stage of the process, openly recognising that they, as insiders, are part of the study also, not outside observers. All dialogue, verbal and written, is socially constructed and researchers need to reflect on their experiences in the process, and on how who they are and what they do becomes an unavoidable influence in the research. Carefulness on behalf of the researcher is especially necessary in relating the findings so as to portray an honest picture not a ‘rosy’ or skewed one that may fit the researcher’s hopes (Josselson, 2013). These principles of researcher reflexivity have guided my research process. I kept a research journal throughout, documenting my wonderings and reflections about the interactive counselling process in relation to my research foci.

Solution-Focused Counselling

The solution-focused approach, the modality of counselling that I primarily use, has constructionism as a core conceptual framework also. Solution-focused counsellors do not presume to be experts in clients’ lives and their context, but see them as unique, with their own life experiences lived out in the social context of their culture and family. Clients’
solutions will be in the context of their own lives, with counsellors assisting them to find what works. The solution-focused approach is collaborative where the counsellor and client work together to find possibilities for change in the client’s life. The counsellor’s questioning helps the client to see what things have worked or been better in the past, and, how the client was able to effect change using their own resources. Questioning also elicits ideas from clients about things they could try in order to take small steps towards their goals. Between-session tasks are most often co-constructed as a result of these collaborative solution-building conversations. The aim is that the client will be empowered and able to find their own solutions in their own life, outside of the counselling room, apart from the counsellor.

I have a strong allegiance to this model of counselling. Through the language of expectancy I see that this approach can create hope and optimism, building personal agency and confidence for adolescents. My hope is that adolescents complete counselling with the confidence that they have made changes and have been able to achieve their goals themselves, that is, they feel empowered. In every session, I give priority to building a strong therapeutic relationship with my clients (Lambert & Barley, 2001). Adolescents need to feel that they can relate easily with the counsellor and receive non-judgmental acceptance, especially in the context of a school where adults can be seen as authority figures (Metcalf, 2008). A detailed explanation of a typical solution-focused counselling session and the specific techniques and skills used is outlined in the procedures section of this report.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethics approval for this research project was given by the Human Ethics Committee at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand (Appendix A). Informed consent was gained from the school principal, the Head of Guidance, the student participants and their caregivers (see Appendices B and C for information and consent forms). Interestingly, my school principal requested that I provide students with a more simple explanation of my research so
that they and their families would be able to understand it easily. Hence, the ethical dilemma of fulfilling all the requirements of an ethics committee while at the same time trying to produce something that is simple and short enough for 13 year olds and their families to understand easily. My research and counselling practice was also guided by counsellor guidelines as laid out in the New Zealand Association of Counsellors’ Code of Ethics (2014).

There were a number of ethical issues to address in my study (Bager-Charleson, 2014; McLeod, 2012): the dual relationship of practice-based research, informed consent, confidentiality and avoidance of harm. Practice-based research must give consideration to the two kinds of relationships that develop: that of the researcher and participant, and that of the counsellor and client. The relationship ought to be one of respect, trust and reciprocity: where the participant-counsellor may assist clients in exploring ways that work for them and the participant-client in turn assists the researcher-counsellor in exploring their area of interest. In my research, I worked hard to build a good, collaborative relationship with clients in an effort to minimise any perceived power differences and to maximise equality throughout our counselling and research process (Bager-Charleson, 2014). Having a strong therapeutic relationship also works to ensure that rich and meaningful data may be gathered from open and honest conversations during the collaborative process. The person-centred, solution-focused way of working allows the client to be the expert in their life and to articulate what is important for them. This client-led process also helps minimise power differences and enables a positive therapeutic alliance to be built.

Informed consent was obtained from the students and their parents before any research had started and was reconfirmed at the end of the process due to the fact that participants did not know what they would say at the beginning, but did know what they had said by the end, and therefore, retrospectively, needed to be happy to have their disclosures
and shared experiences revealed within the research. Participants were able to withdraw at any stage and were given opportunity to continue or discontinue throughout the process.

Confidentiality was assured for participants as is expected within the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (2014) Code of Ethics. Anonymity of identities and of the research location was also ensured. Participants were consulted about their pseudonyms to encourage a joint ownership and investment in the research.

Avoidance of harm for participant-clients is paramount. Clients should not be disadvantaged in any way by being a participant in research while undertaking counselling. At all times in practice-based research the client’s best interest and care are central. There should be no compromise on best practice being used for each client. In all situations, the research process and requirements must be secondary to that of the therapeutic process (Bager-Charleson, 2014). At all times, I prioritised the counselling process above the research process. I consider that clients were very likely to be advantaged by participating in the research due to my extra-focused attention, re-hearing and reflecting on their cases. Regular professional supervision was helpful in ensuring I was doing my best for my clients.

**Rigour and Trustworthiness**

Rigour and trustworthiness refers to the degree of credibility and validity a study has. Adhering to good methodological principals ensures greater rigour and trustworthiness with results more likely to be accurate from the perspective of the researcher, the client and the readers (Creswell, 2014). A clear research focus was proposed with supporting questions. The case study design chosen to explore the phenomenon of between-session task negotiation and client experience proved to be appropriate for this research, yielding useful data that when interpreted, gave understanding to this process. Detailed explanations of the procedures that were followed while planning, undertaking and analysing the research have been
described fully so that the reader may be confident in the research process and in the accurate presentation of results (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Multiple sources of data have been used which have provided a rich, detailed data collection allowing triangulation of different data sources. Data was in the form of transcripts of audio-recorded counselling sessions and final interviews; researcher notes and observations during counselling sessions; and, researcher reflective notes on the counselling process with my clients. In-depth case analysis and cross-case analysis has helped make the themes more convincing to the reader.

Data and my initial researcher interpretations were shared with my supervisor and a peer and discussions were had about what the data appeared to be saying. These discussions were helpful and caused me to further refine my research focus during the early stages of my data collection. Examining my data and interpretive analysis with my supervisor at a later stage gave me confidence that my themes could be recognised from an outsiders’ perspective and that clients’ viewpoints were reflected accurately. As I analysed the data, I endeavoured to stay open to other alternatives as to what might be happening with regard to between-session tasks. For example, I wondered whether a power difference between counsellor and client might be compelling students to engage with tasks or not. These conversations and reflections worked to minimise any researcher bias on my part.

In each part of the research process I was reflexive. I was aware of my own views about myself and others and my assumptions especially with regard to between-session task negotiation. I realised that who I was, and how I viewed things may influence the research process. It was important therefore to quote comments from clients that accurately portrayed their experience rather than notes from my own perceptions. At one time, my supervisor
questioned how I was seeing a case, and upon reflection, I was able to adjust my thinking about what was happening.

Information has been shared (with permission) about my clients and their issues and their progress made during counselling. This in-depth information will hopefully engage the reader and enable them to share in clients’ experiences and journeys more fully. I have also described the setting of the research and the solution-focused counselling sessions where the specific topic of between-session tasks was explored, so that the reader will be able to determine for themselves whether the study findings are credible and could be relevant to their particular situation or not (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The use of scaling as part of my counselling process gave a tangible measure of client progress and confidence throughout the research (Quick, 2012). This scaling was useful in showing individual’s progress week-to-week and was also useful when comparing across cases. Readers can easily understand scales and are able to make some of their own conclusions about the data. Providing enough information regarding the research process, the clients and the data makes it possible for readers to make their own interpretations regarding the research focus and findings (McLeod, 2011).
CHAPTER FOUR

Methods

Introduction

In this chapter, the research setting is described and the procedures that were used for participant recruitment, screening and the gaining of consent are explained. The solution-focused counselling approach that I have used within each session is also described. Data collection and methods used to analyse the data from the four cases studied are outlined, and details of how the findings will be presented are explained.

Setting

The research was conducted in a New Zealand secondary school where I was employed as a counsellor. Counselling sessions were during class time, in my office, in the guidance area of the school.

Participants

Case study research focuses on gathering and analysing rich data from a small sample of participants. For my research, therefore, I chose to recruit 3-5 students whose counselling sessions would be recorded, transcribed and fully reflected upon (Lichtman, 2013).

Recruitment and screening. My aim was to recruit 3-5 students from the high school where I was working. To advertise my research and recruit voluntary participants, I visited three Year 9 and 10 form classes. This size of group had the right balance of not-too-personal, but personal enough for students to consider participating in my research. All students were given a simplified information sheet (Appendix B) to follow as I explained my research and what kind of commitment it would involve. At the end of my brief talks students spontaneously handed in their forms to me. Students who were interested in participating had already signed their form before handing it in. This was not as I had planned, however it
worked very well. My plan was that all students would take a form and those who were interested would return their signed form to me in the Guidance Department so that their interest would be confidential. It is evident that, for the most part, students at this high school are quite comfortable about going to counselling.

I met individually with each interested student and explained fully what was involved if they were to participate in the research, using the information sheet (Appendix C). Students were given the opportunity to ask questions. I also assessed whether their particular concern was suitable for my research. Potential participants with very complicated issues and those with issues that could take a long time to resolve would not have been suitable for this time-bound study. Five students were recruited for the study, however one of these students only needed two counselling sessions to alleviate her concerns. This meant that focus on between-session tasks was limited, so her data was not included in the research.

The students ranged in age from 13 to 15 years old: one female and three males. Two of the boys identified as Pasifika and the other girl and boy identified as New Zealand European. I was considerate as to how to relate to clients within their cultural contexts, especially to the Pasifika clients given that I am New Zealand European. My learning and experience as a school teacher and a counsellor in Aotearoa, New Zealand has provided helpful knowledge about being culturally responsive (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2014). For this case study research, ethnicity was not explored as a variable. Each unique case provided useful information as I explored how between-session tasks are co-constructed and experienced by adolescent clients.

**Participant researcher.** As previously mentioned, I am an experienced school teacher and a novice counsellor identifying as New Zealand European. In this study, I was both researcher and participant. I participated in the counselling process and at the same time
gathered information as I observed, listened and reflected on each case (Lichtman, 2013). (More details of my dual role in this research have been discussed earlier in this report.)

**Consent and Confidentiality**

Confidentiality and protection of identity was assured for the students as discussed earlier. Interested students were given information sheets and consent forms for themselves and their caregivers. (The University of Canterbury, Human Ethics Committee require students under the age of 18 years-old to gain caregiver consent before being involved in any research.) Students were asked to discuss the research and their desire to attend counselling with their caregivers, and, if both were happy with the proposed process they were to return the signed consent forms to me. I emphasised that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time prior to the analysis stage of the research. (Further ethical considerations have been discussed earlier in this report.)

**Procedures**

Each participant received a maximum of five, weekly, 30-50 minute counselling sessions. After participants’ final or fifth session, another shorter interview (maximum of 30 minutes) was conducted where I asked participants semi-structured questions relating to the between-session tasks and their experience (see Appendix D). Counselling was conducted on a weekly basis, however, there were larger breaks for two clients who were ill for a week and a two week school holiday break also interrupted three of the cases. Final interviews were conducted within a week of completing the fifth session of counselling in all but one case. It did not appear to me that these time differences affected the therapeutic process or the final interviews. A solution-focused approach was used in all counselling sessions as described below.
Solution-Focused Counselling

A similar counselling approach was used for each participant. Initially, plenty of time was taken to build a strong therapeutic alliance. Typically this involved finding out about participants’ backgrounds, their families and the things they were interested in. Getting to know the client apart from their problem is vitally important and gives valuable information about their interests, strengths and capabilities that is often useful in subsequent sessions (Hanton, 2011). This problem-free talk is a key skill in solution-focused practice. In the first session we also talked briefly about the structure of each session, how I work as a solution-focused counsellor, and what clients could expect. As part of this introduction, I explained the rationale for why we agree on a between-session task each week: to do something in their life outside of counselling that will help them move towards their goals. A typical structure for each initial solution-focused session is described as follows (De Jong & Berg, 2012; Hanton, 2011):

Firstly, the client’s concern is clarified. In solution-focused therapy, problems are acknowledged but are not focused on and talked about in detail. Clients are listened to and validated, however, conversation moves quickly towards how they would like things to be in the future. Clients’ best hopes for coming to counselling are talked about. It is important for clients and counsellor to know what the client is expecting to get out of coming to counselling, and how they would know it had been helpful.

Clients are asked if they have experienced any pre-session change: positive change that may have happened before the first counselling session. This often provides an opportunity for clients to notice small positive changes and to notice what they were doing that was working for them already. This amplifies clients’ abilities and successes and builds their agency. It begins the process of solution-building in the early stages of counselling.
Looking ahead, goals are formulated as clients articulate a clear and descriptive picture of how they would like things to be. The Miracle Question is often used to help clients create a picture of a preferred future: “Suppose that tonight when you went to sleep and a miracle happened and the problem was solved. How would you know there had been a miracle? What would you notice that would be different?” The future is created as clients co-construct a more desired reality and create future memories (Hanton, 2011). Well-formed goals provide specific details that clients may begin to work towards between sessions.

Times when the problem is not there or is a little better are explored. These exceptions, when deconstructed, provide insights for the client and help them see what they were doing to make the situation better. If clients can identify what they were doing for things to work, then part of a solution may be to do more of what works so that these exceptions happen more regularly. If there are no exceptions then coping questions are asked to draw out client strengths relating to how they have been able to manage so far in spite of their difficulty. This is done with the aim of empowering clients with the knowledge that they are able, and have the resources to move towards their preferred future.

Scaling is used in a number of ways throughout solution-focused counselling sessions. Most often it is used to track the client’s position in relation to their goals. Clients rate themselves on a particular aspect (often the level of concern they have about the issue that brought them to counselling). They use a 1-10 scale and will often describe what makes it that particular number. Scales are also used to show client motivation or confidence in their ability to do a particular task and as indicators of what level of progress would be good enough for clients. Differences between ratings provide opportunity to explore and amplify things that help maintain progress.
Towards the end of the session a *break* is taken by the counsellor. I took a 1 minute break to reflect on what had been talked about and to prepare some feedback for each client. There are three parts to the *feedback*: Firstly, *compliments* are given to the client: these are affirming statements that reinforce clients’ strengths and achievements that have been highlighted in the session with the aim of focusing on the positive to help clients recognise their own capabilities. Secondly, the *bridging statement* links the compliments about successes and abilities to client goals and possible next steps. Thirdly a *between-session task* is agreed upon: clients are encouraged to do something that will help them move closer towards their goals between sessions. Tasks are also referred to as *suggestions*. There are a number of ways that tasks can be agreed upon and this is an interest in this current research.

Subsequent sessions follow a similar format: scaling progress, talking about goals, looking for exceptions and amplifying things that are working for the client. Most often sessions begin with the counsellor asking, “What’s better?” This creates an expectation of change for clients and helps them look for even small bits of improvement. Client sharing is usually followed up by more questions that amplify their success and the things they have done to make change happen.

There are a number of solution-focused tools that are used throughout the counselling process. The acronym EARS stands for: Eliciting exceptions, Amplifying, Reinforcing successes and strengths and Starting again (De Jong & Berg, 2012, p. 149). These skills are used throughout the counselling process to construct detailed pictures of client successes and resources. Often counsellors ask, “What else?” to elicit details about clients’ progress or features of client goals.

*Pre-suppositional questions* are used to create positive expectancy for the client, for example, “when things are better”, not “if things are better”. These are sometimes in the form
of relationship questions which are often used to help clients construct descriptions of positive interactions in their emerging future. For example, “What might be different between you and your mum…?” Skilful questioning enables the client to envision a future without the problem.

This structure, as outlined above, was not always followed in the exact order in my research, however, most aspects and skills in this solution-focused approach were found in my counselling sessions over time.

**Procedures Relating to Between-Session Tasks**

In this section, I outline in detail the way I have worked with clients when talking about between-session tasks. In the first session, a rationale for trying something between sessions was always presented to clients with the explanation that their lives are outside of the counselling room and that it is useful to be working on something between sessions to take small steps towards their goals. In subsequent sessions, clients were asked, “What’s better?” and clients would often scale their perceived progress with their specific concern. Discussions then amplified clients’ goals, exceptions and strengths. Towards the end of the session, after I had taken a short break and had given some feedback about clients’ abilities, successes and what was working for them, I would invite clients to suggest something that might be helpful for them to do between sessions: something that may have been highlighted for them during the session. If they did not have a suggestion, I would suggest an easy task that related to something that they had said in our session (usually relating to their goals or something that had worked for them) and ask if that was something they thought they might be able to try. Often clients were asked for a measure (1-10) to indicate how confident they were that they could do their task.
The following week, if the between-session task did not come up in conversation, I would enquire about it in a curious way. Any success with tasks was amplified. Conversations relating to selecting and engaging with the next between-session task continued in this kind of pattern. As time progressed and my understanding about the interactive process grew, I developed better ways of talking about between-session tasks. This is to be expected in practice-based research; as I reflected on what was happening for both me and the client, I was able to make helpful adjustments.

Throughout the research I took particular note about what tasks were agreed upon and how they related to what had been said during counselling sessions, how tasks were suggested and decided upon, and whether clients had engaged with tasks between sessions and how that was for them. Noting client experience of this process was an important part of my research. The final interview revealed much about how clients experienced this process.

**Final Interviews**

Participants were asked a number of semi-structured questions regarding their experience of between-session tasks (see Appendix D). This interview was very similar to any solution-focused inquiry where I was curious to know how it was for them. To remind clients of what we had done, I reviewed each of the between-session tasks that we had agreed upon, noting who had suggested them. Participants willingly described their perceptions of the usefulness of between-session tasks for their progress. Their descriptions contributed to the development of the final themes.

**Data Collection**

Data were gathered from three sources: transcripts of conversations had during counselling sessions (especially the beginning and end of sessions) and the final interview; notes from observations of non-verbal expressions and responses made during sessions; and
reflective notes recorded in my research journal collected throughout the research process. Counselling sessions were audio-recorded. The combination of the three sets of data gives a rich, in-depth description of the interactive process and when rigorously analysed gives greater validity to this study (Creswell, 2014).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an interpretative and inductive process requiring me to continually review, adjust and reflect on my perceptions and findings while the research was taking place. It was helpful that my sessions were spread over a reasonable period of time giving me more opportunity to reflect and modify my practice and questioning as I went along. A schedule of the counselling sessions and final interviews is found in Appendix E. Transcripts of counselling sessions, observation notes and researcher reflexive notes were examined in-depth throughout the study: thoroughly read and re-read. In this interpretative process, as I read and reflected on each case, I highlighted and coded what I considered to be meaningful units of data relevant to my research focus (Lichtman, 2013). My reflective thoughts were sometimes specific to the between-session task research focus and at other times more related to my counselling practice. For example, early in my research, upon reflection, I thought of a better way to invite participants to suggest their own between-session task.

Consistent with qualitative methodology, codes were not pre-determined but emerged from the data. Rather than leading the research, I tried to follow the data and what it appeared to be saying. Initially there were many ideas and codes. Codes were put into categories and finally concepts or themes were developed from these (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007; Lichtman, 2013). For example, initially I had 19 different codes relating to common pieces of datum. Some codes I choose not to explore any further because they were not as specifically related to my research foci. One example of this was a writing code. I had datum about how between-session tasks were recorded (written down or not) and clients’ experiences of this,
however, though it was of interest to me, it did not help answer my research questions that focused on how between-session tasks were co-constructed and experienced, so I did not pursue this code any further.

Initially I thought I might be reporting on specific solution-focused techniques relating to how between-session tasks were co-constructed, however as I reflected on the data, other things caught my attention more. My research focus altered slightly at this analysis stage as I realised that what was of most interest to me was not just the conversations that led up to between-session task co-construction, but the client experiences of the task co-construction process and the effect doing the tasks had on the participants (Lichtman, 2013).

I found that many of my codes could be joined together under larger categories or topics. For example, my code of *Between-session tasks are useful* became the main category under which other related factors (codes) sat: ‘What’s better?’ was often related to between-session tasks, tasks provided a measure of progress, tasks helped build confidence and agency, and tasks supported client thinking. Four main categories emerged from the data which became my four themes. These themes are introduced in the following chapter so that the reader can easily identify them as the case studies are presented.

**Presentation of Findings**

Each case study is presented separately, documenting the process of between-session task conversations, client engagement with tasks, and follow-up discussions that occurred over a number of counselling sessions. Relevant dialogue relating to the themes has been quoted. Researcher/counsellor reflections have also been noted throughout each case. A brief case analysis is given at the end of each case study chapter, followed by a summary of counsellor learning from each case. Chapter Ten then draws the findings together in a cross-case analysis before the findings are discussed alongside the literature in Chapter Eleven.
CHAPTER FIVE

Findings: Introduction to Themes

In this chapter I briefly introduce the four themes that emerged from the data so that the reader can identify these as each case is presented. In-depth details of these themes emerge as they are documented both within and across the cases studied. The four themes relate specifically to my research question: How are between-session tasks co-constructed and experienced by adolescents in solution-focused counselling sessions?

Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations reveal appropriate between-session tasks

This theme refers to how therapeutic discussions highlighted details of client goals and exceptions revealing possible, appropriate between-session tasks. When tasks were appropriate (in that they had emerged from co-constructive conversations) clients readily engaged with them. Measuring clients’ confidence in their ability to do their between-session tasks was a helpful indicator of task suitability and/or client motivation. For the readers’ convenience I refer to data relating to this theme as, Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations.

Theme 2: Whose suggestion?

Suggestion of the specific between-session tasks is sometimes by the counsellor and other times by the client. This theme documents what happened in each case and how these suggestions were experienced. Theme 2: Suggestions, notes data relevant to this theme.

Theme 3: Follow-up about between-session tasks is helpful.

This theme explores how finding out about client progress in relation to their between-session tasks in the next session was useful in the therapeutic process: for both counsellor and clients. Theme 3: Follow-up, notes data that is relevant to this theme.
Theme 4: Between session tasks are helpful.

This theme explores how clients found that having a between-session task was helpful. Tasks provided a measure of progress for clients. Clients’ self-confidence and agency improved, and client thinking processes were supported. Theme 4: Tasks are helpful, notes data that relate to this theme.

Case Studies

In the following four chapters, a summary of the counselling with each young person is given. The findings of this research and the themes that have emerged in relation to the research questions are illustrated as each case study is presented. The case studies provide many examples of solution-focused practice, however, for the purpose of this research I have only highlighted areas that specifically relate to between-session task co-construction and client experience. It is hoped that, through these accounts, the reader might journey with these young people and enjoy their success as I did.
Carly

(V represents my spoken words and C represents Carly’s spoken words.)

Carly (pseudonym) is a 13 year old, New Zealand European student at high school. She is an avid reader and a music enthusiast with a love for singing. Carly was new to high school, starting a few weeks late in Term 1. She wanted to come to counselling to get some help with her relationships at school. (Our sessions began at the beginning of Term 3). She had experienced difficulties with friendships at her previous school so this was not a new problem. Initially, Carly was quiet and shy and did not enter into conversation easily, however once we had built a good rapport and had found some common ground, she became quite animated and chatty, obviously enjoying being able to talk about her concerns and her interests.

Session 1

Presenting problem. Carly was having difficulty forming friendships with girls in her class and was having problems with one of her friends with whom she had fallen out. She was lonely and did not feel included in conversations. She said, “I always feel like I am an outcast...no-one talks to me...and I don’t contribute...it kind of feels like there is a one-way mirror between me and them”. Carly sat and read her book each day before school because she had no-one to “hang with”. Using the miracle question, we explored, in detail, how it will be when she has good friendships, what will be happening, what will she be doing and what others will be noticing.

Goal. To have good friendships. When this happens Carly will (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations):

- Be included in conversations
- Fit in, have people to sit with, feel less shy and more courageous
- Feel less awkward with Penny
- Be “stronger” friends with Christine: “Someone there for me...can understand me, gets me.”
- Be happier - others will see her smiling and laughing more.

Exceptions/strengths. Relationships had already improved since coming to high school. Carly was able to articulate that she had opened up to girls, and had been friendly and had sat with them even though she was not involved much in the conversations. She was also able to say how she had coped at her old school where things had been much worse (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). These actions were amplified and celebrated which helped build Carly’s self-confidence.

Scaling. At her old school, Carly would have rated herself a 3 out of 10 towards her goal of good friendships, however, she had already gone up to 6 out of 10 by our first session. Carly was able to point out things that made her situation a 6: she had people to sit with and she had met Christine who had a common interest in Dr Who. This gave more opportunity to celebrate Carly’s success and reinforce exceptions (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). As this was the first session, after some relationship building, I gave Carly a rationale for the usefulness of doing something between sessions.

V: You obviously want things to be better and you have come with some good ideas and some things that you have actually tried in the past, and when we are here, we talk for 45 minutes, but most of the work is done when you leave here, it’s like ‘between’ when I see you now and next time, that’s when the work happens...outside of counselling...
End of session feedback. After taking a one minute break to reflect on the session, I complimented Carly on what she had done already to progress from a 3 to a 6, reiterated her goals, and invited any between-session task suggestions. My hope was that something might have sparked for her during our collaborative, co-constructive conversation and she may have had an idea of what would be helpful for her to work on.

V: While I have a wee break I will ask you to think about anything that has come up for you today and you might be able to suggest something that you might be able to try this week to make things better or to move a wee bit closer from your 6 towards your miracle day (Theme 2: Suggestions)... Break

V: ...because you want to have better friendships and feel more connected, I’m wondering if anything has come to mind that you would like to work on between now and next week...any suggestions?

C: Not really I don’t know.

V: That’s fine. I’m just wondering...we talked about being part of conversations...that you would like to be included in those conversations...(Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations)

C: Yeah

V: I’m just wondering...whether just noticing (this is a pretty easy task) whether you could notice the conversations that you might be able to be part of.

C: Mm mm...

V: You don’t have to join in but just to notice...oh... this could be a conversation I could be a part of.
C: Yeah that’s what I usually do.

V: You never know there might be something you might want to add or even just look like you are interested. Do you think you might be able to be attentive to that this week?

C: Yeah.

Carly did not say much, however, she was actively engaged in our discussion with lots of responding fillers and nods showing agreement or that she was following.

An offer to write her between-session tasks down was declined with Carly saying, “No, I’ve got a good memory”. Her comment indicated to me an intention to remember and engage with the suggested between-session task.

Counsellor/researcher comments. Since Carly did not offer any suggestions, perhaps due to the newness of this kind of counselling, or a lack of ideas or confidence, I tentatively suggested the easy noticing task. This task was linked to her goal of wanting to be included and talking in group conversations in the class (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). It was a task that she could not fail at. Her response showed that it wasn’t too hard and that she had already done this at times. At the time, I was not sure whether my suggestion was appropriate. On reflection after the session, I considered how asking Carly for a confidence measure to indicate how likely she thought it was that she could do her task would have helped me know how suitable it was. I planned to ask for this on future occasions.

Session 2

In this second session, Carly rated her progress towards good friendships at a 7, one up from the previous week. She talked more and appeared more confident and comfortable with our relationship. After conversations about things that were a little better, I chose to
enquire how her between-session task had gone as she had not brought it up. As outlined in the literature review, this is not always asked in solution-focused practice. I hoped to be able to understand her situation and her perspective more and considered asking about her task was a normal part of our working together (Theme 3: Follow-up).

\[ V: \text{Last time we agreed that perhaps you could notice conversations that you could be part of - how was that for you?} \]

\[ C: \text{Yeah, they talk about stuff that I don’t really want to talk about because they have got different topics, it’s quite hard to... they like K-pop, everyone likes K-pop. They are obsessed with it. I am not interested.} \]

\[ V: \text{Were you a wee bit involved anyway? Can you tell me how that went?} \]

\[ C: \text{Yeah, I just listened. I did listen but I didn’t contribute. If it’s a subject I can contribute about, it’s not usually, because I have different interests.} \]

\[ V: \text{If you have got something to say then you will contribute.} \]

\[ C: \text{In my class I do} \]

Carly had engaged with the between-session tasks which showed her motivation (or compliance). My follow-up question about how she went revealed a fuller picture of what was happening and how Carly was feeling and responding in these situations. It also highlighted the importance of having common topics of interest which was a useful finding that we were able to discuss further.

**Goal amplification.** We discussed what group conversations looked like and how they happen. I hoped that perhaps we could co-construct a detailed picture and therefore create the future for Carly (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations).
V: What is happening for the others in the group, what are they doing?

C: They talk...they start a topic...

V: So they bring something up is that right? How do they start a topic?

C: Start talking about it, I don’t know, start talking about what they’ve done in the weekend...

V: So they share about what they have been doing.

C: Yeah and then you share and then it goes on and on and on and then they switch on to something else and it goes on and on and on...

V: So share a bit about whatever their experience is.

C: ...and somebody adds... and somebody adds, oh yeah I went skiing and oh I love snow... and it goes on...

Carly became quite animated when she was telling the story of how group conversations happen. She went on to explain about a time that she had initiated a conversation about going to Australia that went really well (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations).

C: If I go on a holiday they like to talk about that...and where you have been.

V: So it’s finding the topic that can be interesting to the whole group.

Carly’s previous success reminded her about finding the right topic and how she had done it before and could do it again. Finding this exception was a critical point in our session. After our break I complimented Carly on her successes and her skills and invited a suggestion for a between-session task (Theme 2: Suggestions).
V: I am just going to have a little break and if you have got something that you think would be good to work on between sessions then you can suggest that in a minute, okay?

V: ...because you are wanting to have that fitting in and good friendships in the group situation I’m wondering if you have thought of anything that would be useful to try this week in your class (Theme 2: Suggestions).

C: Not really

V: Okay, you have already told me how that talking about your holidays or finding a common experience really helped and the other one was a movie or the notices and because that has worked in the past I am wondering whether this week you could look for a topic that you might be able to bring up as an effort to feel more included

C: Yeah

V: Is that something you might be able to do more of this week?

C: Yeah

V: How does that feel to think about bringing up a topic for you? Say... ah... confident 10 out of 10, 1 out of 10, not confident?

C: I’m fine with it yeah. I usually do it, I sometimes do it automatically.

V: So you are right up there?

Counsellor/researcher comments. Carly had consciously engaged with the ‘noticing conversations’ between-session task, however, had seemed to discount her involvement because she was not interested in K-Pop music. Even though the outcome seemed negative, my enquiring about it led to helpful discussions about what is of interest for groups to talk
about (Theme 2: Follow-up and Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). I had wondered how following up on the between-session tasks would be as I did not want to create any sense of pressure or failure for doing it or not. The discussion, however, proved helpful and gave further insight about Carly’s involvement in group discussions and her willingness and ability to join in if it was something that she could contribute to (Theme 3: Follow-up).

The between-session tasks for this session evolved out of two aspects of conversations: an exception of a time when Carly had successfully brought up a winning topic that led to a good conversation in the group, and a fuller description of what it looks like when people are engaged and talking in the group (amplification of goals). The task was doing more of what Carly had already done and could be a small step towards her goal of being included in conversations (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). The task was again suggested by me as Carly did not suggest anything herself when invited (Theme 2: Suggestions). Carly appeared to readily accept my suggestion and expressed confidence in being able to do it which indicated that she found it suitable.

**Session 3**

‘What’s better?’ was immediately related to Carly’s success with her between-session task (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful):

*C: Um...um, I noticed me starting more conversations yeah.*

*V: Did you? Can you tell me a couple of times, what happened and what did you talk about...how did it go?*

*C: Good...They didn’t blow me off...you just have to find the things to say, the right topic*
Carly had successfully initiated a group discussion about what her friends were doing in the school holidays.

C: They listened to what I had to say and they shared and contributed.

V: How did that feel?

C: I felt included

Carly said that moment of involvement in the group conversation was a 9 for her. Building on this success, we explored how Carly might be able to use the same skills to initiate conversations in other situations with individuals in her class. Summing up was hurried so there was no invitation to suggest a between-session task (Theme 2: Suggestions).

V: I’m going to suggest a between-session task that you bring those skills that you used last week into this one-to-one situation as you suggested (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations).

C: Yep

V: To get more of those good friendships you connect using those same skills. What do you think about that for something to work on? Does that sound like something you would be able to do?

C: Yep.

V: Confidence?

C: I’ll be fine, yeah I’ll do it.

V: Out of 10?

C: 8 out of 10.
**V:** Well done. Look forward to next week’s successes.

**Counsellor/researcher comments.** Carly had intentionally engaged with her between-session task and the ‘What’s better?’ question revealed Carly’s success that she had experienced bringing up a topic of interest (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful). Carly’s success with her task naturally led to more exception and strength talk and thinking about how she could use her abilities in other similar situations such as one-to-one conversations in class (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). Getting an indicator of Carly’s confidence to be able to do her between-session task helped me know if the task was seen to be suitable and manageable since I was the one who suggested it (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations).

**Session 4**

There were lots of things that were better for Carly, mostly relating to a good friendship developing with Christine. Carly rated herself at 8 (good enough was 8 ½). I enquired about the previous week’s between-session task since it had not come up.

**V:** I’m interested to know... remember last week we had the between-session task of trying to bring those skills into the one to one. How has that been for you? (Theme 3: Follow-up)

Carly related how she had again successfully initiated a conversation choosing a topic that she knew her friend would be interested in.

**C:** I brought up rugby with her.

Carly felt that she was listened to and was obviously chuffed about her success talking with a friend, rating those moments of success at a 9. This specific success gave lots of opportunity to draw out Carly’s strengths and build her self-confidence. After the break and compliments I invited any between-session task suggestions.
V: To keep on developing those good friendships have you got something that you want to carry on with? (Theme 2: Suggestions)

C: I don’t know... get better at one-on-ones, but I’m ok with one-on-ones... I don’t know, just contribute more to the group.

V: The group thing?

C: Yeah.

V: All right well how about what you say is you keep on doing what is working with your one-to-ones. We have a saying ‘if it is working do more of it’, so you keep on using your skills to engage with the group...

Counsellor/researcher comments. Again I brought up the between-session task and how it went because Carly had not mentioned it when talking about what’s better (Theme 3: Follow-up). Perhaps it may have come out in conversation, however, if it didn’t, we would have missed amplifying all that wonderful success she had when talking with her friend. I could see her self-confidence building as she made these small steps towards her goals. In this session, for the first time, Carly suggested her own between-session task (Theme 2: Suggestions). I consider that her suggestion of a task was due to her increased level of confidence relating to others, her familiarity with the way we were working together and a growing ease within our therapeutic relationship. Improvement in other areas was being made between sessions, not just in the areas relating to the between-session tasks that Carly was specifically practising during the week. Her efforts and progress extended far beyond the specific tasks she was practising.
Session 5

‘What’s better?’ was again linked to her success in conversing with individuals and groups, that is, the between-session task that she had set (Theme 2: Tasks are helpful). Carly shared how the change was happening in all of her classes.

C: I just get more confident talking as the year progresses. I am more friendly.

V: How is that making you feel, as far as your comfortableness and having good friendship?

C: Good, I like talking to people.

Carly said she felt that she belonged more and was more confident and courageous.

C: I am usually included in the conversation, I can add to it.

I enquired about her between-session task since it had not come up directly although her success was evident from her countenance and from all that she was saying (Theme 3: Follow-up).

V: I am interested if you were remembering that you were going to contribute to the group?

C: Yep.

V: I am wondering if having that between-session task (of contributing one-to-one and in the group) made a difference to what you were doing?

C: Yeah. I tried more. (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful)

Carly explained that she tried more knowing that she was working on the specific between-session task. I wondered if she would have been so determined if the task had not
been so specific. After this we went on to talking about managing her difficult relationship with a friend. After brainstorming some ideas, Carly readily suggested what she would choose to work on between sessions. Her choice of language was showing her developing sense of agency and confidence, and ease with our process (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

V: Is there something you would like to try?

C: I’m going to try the cheerful (strategy) anyway. (Theme 2: Suggestions)

Counsellor/researcher comments: Carly had reached 8 by this fifth session. Her good enough was 8½ which she reached in the next session which was not included in the research. After this session we met briefly for our final semi-structured interview.

Final Interview

Carly described her experience of working on something between sessions. She had thought about the tasks and practised them and felt that this was an important factor in her progress (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

C: Good. I do it more better now because I practise. Now I do it naturally yeah...

V: What helped you do them?

C: Confidence cos if I want to talk to someone I always don’t have much courage but now I talk to them better, I pluck up the courage.

Carly said it made a difference knowing that we were going to talk about the between-session task the next week (Theme 3: Follow-up).
C: Yeah cos I was trying for someone else not just for doing it, I know that, yeah.

Even though I had suggested three of the five tasks, Carly rated (out of 10) all the specific tasks to be suitable (9), manageable (10) and easy (9) (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations).

C: Each of them kind of like builds your confidence, I don't know, they were helpful.

She did not feel it mattered or made any difference as to who suggested the task. The reason seemed to be that tasks were things that she wanted and had talked about anyway (Theme 2: Suggestions).

C: They were mostly you just thought my thing that I wanted ... You just thought my thoughts. (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations and Theme 2: Suggestions)

Carly described her experience of doing (achieving) what she wanted:

C: It builds me up each one it’s like a building block – up (hands stepping up higher and higher like building blocks)

She expressed that she was much more confident in her ability, retrospectively rating herself at a 4 when she first came in and an 8 at this interview. That is a big shift! She attributed her increased confidence to her practice outside of counselling, between sessions.

C: Confident and more talk to people and more yeah. (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful)

C: I wouldn’t be how I am today. I would be less confident. I’d just hide away.

V: So it was the practice outside, is that what you mean?

C: Yeah it was the practice outside and it was the practices in class and yeah, when you practise you get more confident.
**Counsellor/researcher comments:** Over the five sessions, Carly made progress in many areas of her friendships, not just the areas that the between-session tasks focused on. It was evident that she was thinking and working on far more than just her between-session task each week. However, having a focus on one thing that was measureable, through the scaling process, enabled Carly to see her progress and to realise her strengths and abilities, resulting in her greater self-confidence. Her sense of agency grew throughout the process as reflected in her estimation of her confidence in her ability to effect change in her situation (from a 4 to an 8 out of 10).

Carly found the between-session tasks to be suitable and manageable because they were what she wanted to do as revealed in our collaborative conversations (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations and Theme 2; Suggestions). It did not matter to her who made the task suggestion, only that it was “what she wanted”. Carly did suggest the task in the fourth and fifth session which I think reflected her growing confidence and ease that she was experiencing in the counselling sessions. She found that knowing she would be talking about tasks with me in the following session helped her engage more with the task (Theme 3: Follow-up). Carly’s confidence grew as she engaged with the between-session tasks – “building blocks” to success. ‘What’s better?’ questions were often related to Carly’s success between sessions (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful). Overall, it was exciting to see Carly become more confident and believing in herself and in her ability to effect change in her situation.

Between-session tasks were small steps Carly took each week that made big changes in the end.

Carly no longer reads by herself before school because she has friends to hang with and confidence in her ability to know how to join in with others. She has even started to be interested in K-Pop!
Case Analysis: Carly

A brief summary of the case as a whole in relation to the four themes is given below.

**Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations reveal appropriate between-session tasks.** All Carly’s between-session tasks emerged from our co-constructive conversations during the counselling sessions. We unpacked details of group conversations (goals) and times when Carly had already been successful (exceptions and strengths) and these became ideas for between-session tasks. Consequently, Carly found all her tasks suitable and manageable and there did not appear to be any barriers to her engaging with them. Asking her to scale her level of confidence to be able to do a task was a useful indicator of task appropriateness, especially if I had suggested the task. This instant feedback showed if there was any need to modify tasks to increase their suitability.

**Theme 2: Whose suggestion?** Carly felt that it made no difference to her as to who suggested the task, but did point out that what was suggested was what she wanted anyway. From my counsellor perspective I much preferred it when Carly set the task because there was no doubt as to whether the task was what she wanted or not.

**Theme 3: Follow-up about between-session tasks is helpful.** Between-session tasks were often brought up when talking about what’s better. When tasks did not come up in the conversation I asked about them in a curious, non-threatening way. On every occasion this enquiring revealed rich information about Carly’s situation that was helpful to the therapeutic process. There was no apparent discomfort to Carly perhaps due to the fact that she had engaged with her tasks each week. Carly was aware that I would ask about her task and this made her try harder, for me, not just for her. In this case, a little bit of accountability increased her efforts.
Theme 4: Between-session tasks are helpful. Carly was adamant about the usefulness of her tasks, crediting much of her progress to practising them in-between sessions. Having specific tasks that could be measured helped Carly to see her progress in at least one area. Progress however was not confined to just between session tasks but was also evident in other areas of her friendship making. Growth in confidence for Carly was huge. Her whole demeanour had changed over the five weeks of our working together. Her success built her confidence which led to more success. Having a between-session task appeared to help Carly’s thinking. She “thought about it a lot”, and was aware and looking to practise during the week.

Counsellor learning from this case

1. Scaling moments of success provides helpful feedback for the counsellor and the client. Carly could see that she was attaining her goals at times through her own efforts, and feedback using scaling provided me with information and confirmation that what Carly was working on between sessions was what she really wanted, as reflected in her 9 rating when she had been part of a group conversation.

2. Asking about between-session tasks gives a lot of valuable insights and information that may otherwise be missed.

3. Specific tasks enable specific feedback but do not restrict progress in other areas.

4. Giving an easy noticing task is effective for a client with few ideas or who may lack confidence.

5. Client-suggested tasks remove any counsellor doubt about suggestions being appropriate.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Lane

(V represents my spoken words and L represents Lane’s spoken words.)

Lane (pseudonym) is a 15 year old, New Zealand European student at high school. He is a keen sportsman and also enjoys playing play-station and going to the movies. He has a good group of friends at school. Lane volunteered for my research because he wanted to come to counselling to get some help with being motivated to come to school. On first meeting, Lane appeared to underestimate his ability, however he communicated freely and had lots of ideas about how he would like things to be. He was very keen to do well at school and life, and was refreshingly honest about himself and where he was at.

Session 1

Presenting problem. Lane lacked motivation. His mother made him come to school and he was often late. Lane regularly found school, especially Science, boring.

L: I just feel like I am too tired or can’t be bothered or the teachers are boring.

He rated himself 5 out of 10 for motivation at the start of our session and thought that 8 would be good enough.

Goal. Be motivated to come to school. When this happens Lane will (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations):

- Be on time for school
- Have breakfast
- Have more energy – better slept?
- Be able to learn more
- Achieve at school, now and in the future: NCEA
- Get a good job ("not a stupid one")

Teachers will notice Lane doing his work and answering questions and friends will notice him trying really hard.

Exceptions. Thursday was already an 8 out of 10 day for Lane because he had enjoyable subjects and he looked forward to playing basketball.

When invited, Lane suggested his own between-session task (Theme 2: Suggestions) that was directly related to his goal (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). He chose something that we had talked about during the session:

   L: I could try and get up earlier and have breakfast.

   V: Ok...all right that was a pretty similar one to what I was thinking of...I was thinking of perhaps just this week you could try and do what you suggested (earlier in the session) and be at school 5 min before the bell...

   L: Yeah...

We went on to talk about specifics of how Lane would do this between-session task.

   V: That’s a good action plan...my suggestion was to be on time for school, yours was to get up earlier and have breakfast... and we have combined the two.

Lane declined an offer to write down his action plan saying: “I’ll remember”. This was an indication to me that he was planning to engage with the task that we had agreed on.

Counsellor/researcher comments. Upon reflection, I wished that I had gone with Lane’s between-session task suggestion without adding to it, allowing him to lead in the process as is consistent with solution-focused counselling. I wondered how adding my suggestion to his
task would affect his engagement with it. Both suggested tasks evolved out of our therapeutic conversations and were what he said he wanted (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations).

**Session 2**

When Lane returned the following week, he thought his motivation level had gone up to a 7, two up from the previous week.

*V: Anything a bit better?*

*L: I have been late a couple of times but there have been reasons.*

*V: Have you been on time?*

*L: Monday and Tuesday and may be Wednesday.*

When asked about what was better, Lane readily brought up his between-session tasks (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful). Initially, he saw his lack rather than his success but after discussion this was reframed and seen as a success. Lane had set his alarm, got up earlier and had eaten breakfast three times during the week. He had arrived at school “way before the first bell”. The times that Lane had not been early were due to family commitments and were out of his control. Lane had intentionally thought about (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful), and engaged with, both parts of his between-session task: the part he had suggested and the part that I had added. His 7 rating reflected his improvement and progress towards his goal:

*L: … cos I’ve been on time and I have been planning to be on time...being there before the bell, breakfast, getting up earlier...*

*V: that is a person who is motivated, strategic planning.*

Lane’s success was amplified: how he had done it and how it had resulted in him being more prepared for class and knowing more about what he needed to do. Lane volunteered:
L: yeah I’m going to be on time all this week...I’ve got a routine.

He was 8 out of 10 confident that he could continue to do what was working for him (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). It seemed helpful to have had a specific task as it gave opportunity for Lane to see a measure of progress towards his goal of being motivated (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

Looking back at Lane’s goals we talked about motivation in class which Lane wanted but was struggling with in Science. He shared how he was motivated in Maths and Social Studies. This was a useful exception to find – if he knew how to be involved and motivated in some classes then he would know how to use those same skills in Science and other more boring classes.

V: What does Mr X see of you as a student in his class when we are talking about motivation or the way that you are...what does he see?(Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations)

L: That I do my work, cos not everyone in my class does their work, they slack off.

V: Is that right, but you are focused on your work?

L: I Yeah, I do do it.

V: So you are not wasting time. That is a mark of a motivated young man. What else does Mr X see of you as a student?

L: I do put my hand up. I give anything a go really, even if I get it wrong.

L: I try and contribute in most classes...in English...cos I know what we are doing... I can remember... people forget...but I remember most of it...I don’t forget a lot of things.
Our exception discussion was helpful in building Lane’s self-confidence and awareness of how he was already using his strengths to have success. This discussion formed the idea for Lane’s next between-session task.

V: We are getting to the end of our session and you know how we talked about you working on something outside of here, which you have done so amazingly well this week, I’m wondering what would be useful for you to work on. You said you wanted to carry on with your action plan now you’ve got your routine...

L: Yeah, I am going to do it all this week I’m going to try and be on time every day, cos, it helps me learn.

V: That’s brilliant... so if we keep on rolling that one over. We talked about how learning is important, are there any subjects that you could use some of these qualities, the things that you are doing in Maths and Social Studies, how you are really focussed, you are not wasting time, you are giving everything a go, you are noticing that you actually do know stuff.

L: I suppose I need to do that in Science but I don’t like it.

L: The stuff that I am doing in Maths and Social Studies, I probably need to try do that in Science but I don’t know what the point is in Science.

Further conversation revealed that Lane was having some difficulty understanding Science and that this was a “big reason” for his lack of motivation, nevertheless he knew he needed to at least pass NCEA to get the academic success he was aiming for.

V: I am wondering, because you are wanting to be successful next year and even though you are saying it is hard to understand whether there is one little thing that you have been doing in these other subjects that you could try this week, kind of like
an experiment to see whether you can make it better for yourself to increase your ability and your motivation...

L: Um... focus and like fully understand so I actual taking note of the whole thing.
Yeah, cos sometimes if I like put an answer for it I won’t think about it all the way through, I’ll just say something...

V So focus and think it through?

L Yes, think it through to see if it makes sense of what I am saying. (Theme2: Suggestions)

Counsellor/researcher comments. Again Lane suggested his own task (with some gentle nudging from me) which I felt showed his motivation towards making change even though he was finding Science difficult. Because of Lane’s reluctance, I used the word experiment rather than task to lessen any perceived expectation or pressure on Lane. It felt more comfortable for me that Lane suggested his own task because he was able to choose something that he might be able to be successful at (Theme 2: Suggestions). I neglected to assess his confidence to be able to do the task which would have provided good feedback for me and perhaps reinforce his engagement with his task.

Session 3

Again the ‘what’s better?’ type of question was linked to part of a previous between-session task (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

V: Talking about our motivation... and getting places, how has it been this week?

L Quite good I wasn’t late last week at all.

Lane had continued to work on his Session 1 task of getting to school on time and having breakfast (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful). He had also changed his sleep schedule because he
had noticed himself being tired in the mornings from staying up too late and was now less tired in the mornings. It seemed that focusing on one thing, like being ready in the morning, had an influence on Lane’s thinking and he began to change other things as well (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

The previous session’s task of focusing in Science had not been mentioned so I asked about it (Theme 3: Follow-up). Initially Lane said he had not thought about his between-session task, however realised later that he had.

   L: Oh yeah I’ve done that I’ve asked some questions.

   V: Did you ask questions or answer questions – how did you show your motivation in science then?

   L: I answered a couple, I done a bit of both so yeah...

   V: Was that something you thought about doing because you had planned to practise and be a bit more engaged in that one?

   L: Yeah I tried to answer some questions even if I got them wrong, you know, giving it a go that is what matters, that’s what teachers say, who cares if you get it wrong just try.

Lane was animated, displaying a much more positive attitude towards Science than he had the previous week. It seems that his investment in being motivated and trying some things between sessions helped him focus more and be engaged in class (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

   V: Where would you rate your motivation and engagement in your best Science class this week?
L: Today’s one, yeah I liked today’s one, it was all right...9, cos I actually did do the work.

Following up on the between-session task reminded Lane that he had in fact tried doing what he suggested. If I had not asked I may have missed this positive feedback, and in asking I was able to further reinforce and develop an awareness of positive behaviours for learning (Theme 3: Follow-up and Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations).

Lane had got to where he wanted to be and didn’t feel the need for any further sessions. After a break I gave some feedback and a final encouragement to “Keep on doing what you have been doing – it’s working, so do more of it”.

Counsellor/researcher comments. Lane was noticeably engaged in this process of change and was giving lots of thought to what he was doing between sessions, which included far more than just his between-session tasks. For example, we had not focused at all on sleep, however Lane had got thinking and changed his bed-time schedule himself. Discussing previous successes and following up on between-session tasks that had not been mentioned gave plenty of valuable opportunity to reinforce the things that Lane was continuing to do. His future was being co-created by conversations and discussions that we were having.

Final Interview

Lane’s interview gave me valuable insights into how he had experienced between-session tasks in the counselling process. Lane found that the between-session tasks were helpful:

L: It was better cos it made me more motivated to want to go to school, wake up early and not feel tired in the mornings. That was the breakfast and the schedule of being on time. When I had a routine of waking up at 7:40 and having breakfast and being ready... arriving at 8:30.
L: Yes it has (helped him move towards his goals) cos it has made me more focussed in class especially in the boring subjects.

V: It, what exactly is it?

L: Like the schedule that I have been keeping, the breakfast, the sessions here, and just thinking of what I’ve been needing to do to be focussed and to learn and to actually taking note of what they are saying.

Lane found that his specific tasks were suitable and manageable. Interestingly, he found the task I added (being on time) the hardest.

L: Yeah cos if I wasn’t there (at school) I wasn’t learning. The breakfast was the big key…the hardest one was being on time sometimes because…there was like obstacles if you get what I mean.

This shows how Lane knew what was happening in his life at home, not me, and he was well able to choose a task in the context of his life. Lane thought it was better if he suggested the task rather than me:

L: Probably being honest, probably my own ideas for myself…thinking of it myself and then doing it, instead of you thinking of it and me doing it. I would rather make it my own ideas.

Follow-up on between-session tasks was perceived to be helpful. Lane viewed it as a bit of a recap and reminder before moving on.

L: Yeah it was better because we can go back to what we had already done and once we had talked about that we could carry on again – so we remember what we have
been doing from the previous session...yeah it was helpful...it was memory of what we were doing and then doing it at home.

It did not make any difference to Lane knowing that we might talk about how the between-session tasks went. He “was just doing it anyway”.

Confidence in his ability went from a 2 at the start to 8 or 9. Lane expressed that the 9 reflected that he knows he can progress and learn:

L: Yeah I didn’t like school...but coming here and learning what I have to do and focus that has helped a lot to learn to be more prepared for next year and stuff.

Lane’s thinking had been activated. He was future focussed, planning and knowing how he was going to have success in the years to come.

L Just being able to know that I can do it, that I can progress just learn more stuff, especially in Science...learn...listen.

Case Analysis: Lane

Following is a brief summary of the findings of this case as a whole in relation to the four themes.

Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations reveal appropriate between-session tasks. All Lane’s tasks evolved from discussions about his goals and what he was wanting or exceptions where he had experienced success in similar situations such as Maths class. He found all tasks were suitable and manageable which was likely to be due to the fact that they were all things that he had talked about and wanted. Consequently, he engaged very well with tasks and made a lot of progress towards his goals as a result of this.
Theme 2: Whose suggestion? Lane showed willingness to try my between-session tasks suggestions but definitely felt the best way was to have his own suggested tasks. In this case, there was no need for me to suggest anything because Lane had plenty of ideas himself. Interestingly, the task he found the hardest was the one I suggested – being on time. This points to how counsellor suggested tasks can unknowingly create barriers for the client. I did not fully understand Lane’s life and the challenges he would have in getting to school. There were some “obstacles” out of his control that he experienced in trying to achieve his between-session tasks and there was a slight sense of failure in not fully achieving timeliness. This would have been avoided if I had not added to his task. I am confident that he would probably have made these changes in his own time because he improved in so many areas aside from his between-session tasks. I did not need to precipitate this change but rather needed to let him be in full control.

Theme 3: Follow-up about between-session tasks is helpful. Follow-up on between-session tasks was helpful for Lane. He found that reviewing our past work kept it in his mind. My asking specifically about a task was helpful and drew out many successes that Lane had experienced. Not asking, in this case would have lessened the outcomes of our therapy session. Noting successes with between-session tasks allowed Lane to see his definite, measureable progress which worked to build his self-confidence.

Theme 4: Between-session tasks are helpful. Lane found trying tasks helped him move towards his goals. ‘What’s better?’ questions were often linked to success with his between-session tasks. Tasks provided a somewhat tangible measurement of success that, in turn, allowed for amplification and celebration of small steps towards goals. His self-confidence improved (from 2 to 8-9) as a result of the therapeutic process and his success with trying between-session tasks. Lane’s thinking processes had improved: “and just thinking of what
I’ve been needing to do”’. It seemed that Lane had ‘brought to the front’ the ideas, skills and actions he needed to go forward into the coming year with confidence.

**Counsellor learning from this case**

1. Accept clients’ suggestions of tasks and do not add to them – trust that the client knows best and is the expert in their life.

2. The use of scaling to assess how confident a client is to do a task gives an indication of how difficult they feel the task is, and how motivated they are to do it. This is especially important for counsellor suggested tasks. In this case I needed to do this more.

3. A motivated client will do much more between sessions than just the between-session task. This is likely to be due to co-constructive conversations that create detailed pictures of a client’s preferred future.

4. There is potential to feel like a failure if clients have not achieved their task as they would like – ask gently with curiosity and accentuate the positive.

5. The solutions are not always linked to the problem. Lane’s solutions involved behavioural actions in class, sleep, food and organisation.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Tony

(V represents my spoken words and T represents Tony’s spoken words)

Tony (pseudonym) is a 14 year old, Pasifika, high school student. He is a keen sportsman, has good academic ability and a delightful sense of humour. Tony volunteered to participate in my research because he wanted to do better at school. He had done very well in the first part of the year, however, had slipped from his excellent standard of behaviour and achievement to becoming the “class clown” instead. His mid-year report was not complimentary and Tony wanted some change. Tony’s lack of achievement and poor behaviour had been discussed at home and his family were hoping he was going to improve. Initially, Tony was a little embarrassed about coming to counselling which shows his sensitive nature and concern about what others might think.

Session 1

Presenting problem. Poor classroom behaviour and grades. Tony was disrespectful to some teachers, would answer back, was often off task joking around with his mates, and had been sent out of class a number of times. He was disappointed that he had let himself slip after doing so well in the first part of the year.

T: I don’t think I used them wisely (Referring to Term 2 and 3).

Goal. To get good grades. Tony felt that this goal “covers it all”, that is, when he gets good grades all the other things will be sorted also (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). He would be:

- Using class time wisely
- Listening to and following instructions
- Balancing work and fun
- Showing respect to teachers
- Focusing on tasks until completed
- Not distracting friends

**Exceptions.** Tony had already begun to work on his goals prior to coming to counselling. He also had excellent success in Term 1, so there were many strengths and abilities to amplify (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). Tony rated himself in Term 1 as a 9, however, he had slipped to a 2.5 in Term 2. By the first counselling session, he felt he had already improved and was at a 5. He was showing more respect, listening and working better, being truthful and not “carrying on” as much. Tony thought 8 out of 10 would be good enough for him.

Early on in the session I talked with Tony about doing something between-sessions so that he might be thinking about something useful to try as we talked.

Tony expressed his concerns about his friends early in the session; later this became part of his between-session task (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations).

*T: Probably the people that I hang out with, like as for my friends I am not saying that they are really bad and that I shouldn’t hang out with them, but they are cool friends to hang out with but not during education...I’m just trying to focus on my learning and leave them behind but during interval I can hang out with them.*

*V: Sounds as if you have already done some good thinking. So you really like your friends and you like the joking around but there are times when you think you could be doing better.*

Tony described how he wanted to be more focused in class and not joke around as much without being seen as a “nerd”.

T: Just, from 1 to 10, give it an 8, in case my friends go like “What...he’s changed?”

Ah yeah, I just still tell jokes but at the same time work.

After the break and feedback when I complimented Tony’s successes so far, I invited him to suggest a task (Theme 2: Suggestions).

V: Because you are wanting to do better at school in all of those areas, I am wondering if there is anything that we have talked about today that you think, “Oh I’m just going to work on that little piece”. Is there anything that came to mind as you have been thinking? You don’t have to, but I’m just wondering if there is.

T: Um, I’ve been thinking of ah if I was to balance it (working and joking) focus on what I am balancing, just in case I won’t turn into a nerd to my friends.

V: Balance the joking and the gooning around?

T: I just don’t want to be in the nerd corner.

Tony went on to explain that he would focus on his work and when he was done would not distract his friends and tell jokes unless they had finished also.

V: How confident are you that you might be able to do that (balance joking and work)?

T: Probably a 6. I’m working my way up. If I was to look back on what I did today I would do some feedback to myself, and then work my way up, so I’m improving.

Counsellor/researcher comment. The between-session task Tony chose was different to what I had planned to suggest to him (Theme 2: Suggestions). He was able to pin-point exactly where the need for change was. It was what he had talked about a number of times during the session. His task reflected the tussle he was having maintaining his popularity and
humour while at the same time becoming more focused and better behaved without appearing to be a “nerd”. I could not see into his feelings sufficiently to choose the most appropriate task for him. He knew himself better than I did, and ably chose an appropriate task, even though it would be a challenge for him as reflected in his confidence rating of 6/10.

**Session 2**

‘What’s better?’ was linked to the between-session task that Tony had worked on (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful):

\[
V: \text{What’s better this week?}
\]

\[
T: \text{My behaviour, not so much today, just the other days.}
\]

\[
V: \text{Well done congratulations. What about your behaviour was better?}
\]

\[
T: \text{I thought about juggling up my working and joking around with my friends}
\]

\[
V: \text{Did you remember that?}
\]

\[
T: \text{Yeah, I sort of lost my humour...today I tried to get my humour back but then it caused a lot of havoc, like behaviour.}
\]

Tony related how he had focused on his work and instead, his friends had got “the yelling” and been sent out of class.

\[
V: \text{Great that you didn’t get the yelling...in that moment there of you getting on with your work... how was that for you as far as say, achieving your goals? Where would you have put yourself as far as good grades, just in that maths class then?}
\]

\[
T: \text{A 7, just below 8, because today I stuffed up. I would have got an 8 and carried on next week and the next week after, but today, I got sent out...it’s a big downfall.}
\]
Tony was working on his task of finding the balance between joking and working. He was also thinking about the things he would do in the weeks to come (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

We amplified Tony’s successes, which were many. He had improved his focus in class and was the first to complete his work. He had sat apart from friends to help him focus and had shown more respect towards the teachers. Though he was feeling pained by seeming a bit boring, Tony was thinking that:

\[ T: \text{Being humorous and doing your work doesn’t juggle up.} \]

Tony related how he and his friends all managed themselves well in Science class, doing their work and showing respect – a useful exception that we amplified.

Again I invited Tony to suggest something that he would like to work on between sessions. He was very quick to respond, which showed his engagement and ownership of the solution-finding process:

\[ T: \text{Probably the same thing and if it gets up to an 8, I will think of another one but if it gets up to a 9 I won’t} \] (Theme 2 Suggestions).

\[ V: \text{Okay, all right so you are going to keep on working with the balancing of working with the joking. So you want to keep on doing that. How confident are you that you can do that again this week?} \]

\[ T: \text{Ah, probably a 7 still} \]

\[ V: \text{Last week you were 6, so in actual fact you have had some good success, so you can be more confident even than you were last week.} \]
Counsellor/researcher comment. Tony was quick to suggest a task which again took the pressure off me selecting an appropriate task (Theme 2: Suggestions). He was motivated and engaged and taking the lead in this process. He was thinking about finding the balance and thinking about carrying it on into the future and thinking about other things that he might do if he managed the current tasks (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

Session 3

During the week, Tony had slipped back to a 6 for progress towards his goals. He could still articulate the specific things that he was doing well, like finishing his work, while at the same time he was thinking about the things he still wanted to improve on, like not distracting his friends (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful). Tony had not mentioned anything specific about his between-session task, so I asked whether he had thought about his task of juggling humour with work (Theme 3: Follow-up).

V: I want to ask you, you know last week... you were going to keep on with that juggling of balancing the two things, were you thinking about that at all this week?

T: Monday and Tuesday, I just slacked off the rest of the days.

V: Okay, that's honest.

Finding out about the success for those two days and how Tony had intentionally thought about being balanced in Social Studies gave me opportunity to amplify and reinforce his small successes – focusing on the positive part of the week.

V: And are there any other classes that you have felt you have been able to be balanced in?

T: Um... let's say English.

V: So what have you done in English that has shown balance?
This discussion helped Tony think back and articulate the specific things that he had done that worked, (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations and Theme 3: Follow-up) even though he was disappointed with some of his progress.

During this session we looked again at Tony’s goals:

\[ V: \text{So working is actually going okay, let’s tick this one. You are getting your work done and that is all contributing to your good grades isn’t it? What of these (goals) do you want to do better at still?} \]

Tony didn’t want to distract his friends and wanted to do better in Maths.

\[ V: \text{When you say you want to do better in maths, what do you mean?} \]

\[ T: \text{Just ignore, not like in a disrespectful way, just...} \]

\[ V: \text{Ignore the difficult parts of Mr X, is that what you are saying?} \]

\[ T: \text{Yeah.} \]

\[ V: \text{That takes a bit of patience ... how might you ignore those difficult parts, any ideas about that?} \]

**Between-session task.** Tony again suggested his own between-session task (Theme 2: Suggestions). This time it was a challenging one of being patient with Mr X, whom he found very difficult. He was 6 out of 10 confident that he would be able to do this.

**Counsellor/researcher comment.** Again, following up on how Tony’s between-session task was useful. Small successes were recognised and amplified, and extra information that helped build solutions was added (Theme 3: Follow-up). Tony’s next task had emerged from co-constructive conversations about his goals and times when Tony had used his resources to be able to ignore difficult things about Mr X (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). There
were so many areas we had talked about throughout the session, so, it was good that Tony suggested his own between-session task and was able to choose what was most important for him.

Session 4

Tony had reached an 8. This was the point that he thought would be good enough, however, upon reaching 8, he decided that he wanted to go further and aim for a 9, “cos you never know I might fall back and slip”.

Tony reported that he was learning new things in maths. I enquired about his between-session task:

V:...cos our between-session task last week was, I wonder if you remember, you really just wanted to have patience and not be affected by the teacher. Did you remember that that was what you wanted to aim for this week? Did that help, thinking about it? (Theme 3: Follow-up)

T: A little bit but I still haven’t mastered it

V: Were you able to try and be more patient with Mr X.

T: Um you know that at times you really want to talk back...

Tony went on to describe how he had restrained himself from talking back on more than one occasion. It seemed that Tony was learning better in maths because he was not so distracted by being annoyed at his teacher. His between-session task of trying to be patient had been useful in helping him moderate his behaviour in this very difficult area, and this in turn had helped him be more focused on his learning (Theme 4: Tasks are useful).

In all his subjects, Tony reported that he was more focused and was learning better, and that he was distracting his friends less.
V: What else has made your whole learning better...what are the things that you are doing or that you are continuing to do that are working well?

T: Balancing my friends and my learning.

Tony thought that his behaviour change was resulting in improved grades which was his main goal.

V: What is going to make the difference to get you to a 9 now that you have raised the standard

T: Just do the same thing but to a higher level. Learn hard, joke around hard...(Smiling)

V: Keep on doing what you are doing... if it’s working do more of it

Counsellor/researcher comment. It is interesting to note that Tony did not alter his tasks greatly between sessions, which indicated their suitability for him. Mostly he just wanted to do it better than the week before – do more of what works. The tasks seemed to be relevant and focused enough on specific behaviours to be useful. Each week Tony was still working on previous tasks as well as the one for the current week. If I had been suggesting the tasks I imagine that I would have varied them more which may not have been as helpful. Again, following up on Tony’s between session task was useful in that it revealed Tony’s success with being patient and doing well in maths class (Theme 3: Follow-up).

Session 5

We agreed that this would be our last session since Tony was well on the way to achieving his goals. He rated himself 8.5 in this session, reporting that he had received positive feedback from his teacher. He also felt that his reputation would be changing and
that others would be noticing. He was “getting there” in maths, his patience was “all right” and he was finding a balance with his humour, “it is like in the middle”.

\[ T: \textit{The difference between not joking around and serious work and distracting everyone.} \]

\[ V: \textit{I hope you are proud of yourself for the progress you have made and your determination, and your reputation that you are changing.} \]

\[ T: \textit{This has taught me self-esteem. (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful)} \]

Tony had grown in self-confidence. It seemed that he had realised afresh his own abilities and resources, and was using them to help his situation, between sessions.

After considering the things we had talked about during the session, Tony chose a similar between-session task to what he had been doing:

\[ T: \textit{Probably sticking to what I am doing just keep pushing until they (the teachers) realise, till they see a better side of me. (Theme 2 Suggestions)} \]

\[ V: \textit{So, basically keep on doing all the things you are doing, ‘cos you have been incredibly successful.} \]

\[ \textbf{Counsellor/researcher comment.} \] Tony’s spontaneous comment about his increased self-esteem was wonderful. The process of change was impacting how he thought about himself and had built his sense of agency (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

\[ \textbf{Final Interview} \]

Tony found that practising something between sessions was hard at times especially when he felt that his teacher was not respecting him. He found that some things helped towards achieving his goals:
Tony said that he had thought about his tasks during the week. They were helpful reminders of what he was wanting to do and having them had at times helped him moderate his behaviour (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

_T: Yes, so that incident with Mr X, I was going to talk back and then, patience, like okay...helped pull myself in._

Following up on tasks was helpful for Tony because they reminded him of what he was focusing on. It did not seem that he thought about his between-session tasks more because I was going to ask about them (Theme 3: Follow-up).

_T: Yeah a bit...like you did a recap of what it was and that sort of helped I wouldn’t say it didn’t help at all but it did so I was drifting away from patience but then, your recaps and I...oh yeah...(implying that follow-ups kept him on track)_

Tony thought that it was best if we both agreed on a between-session task (Theme 2 Suggestions).

_T: Both of us I guess - like agreeing._

He said he would be willing to try something that I suggested to see if it worked. The following comments show how motivated for change Tony was and how he would give anything a go and then assess its usefulness. His comments also showed how he thought of the process as collaborative.
T: I would try the task (counsellor suggestion) but then I would update you in what happens when I tried so then it would change our minds.

T: I would try that out and see how it works and I would probably write what happened when I was doing that task and tell it to you like keeping you updated on what I was doing. And if that task wasn’t going really well I would probably do it to my suggestion or if it was going really well then I would just keep going with it.

(Theme 2: Suggestions)

Tony was really thinking about how to keep having the success he had experienced and related this to his specific between-session tasks (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful). Identifying specific things he wanted to practise seemed to order his thinking for the present and the future, as reflected in the following comments:

T: I’m still doing it, I’m still going off that page (with the recorded between-session tasks).

T: Well these tasks can lead onto next year as well. I could just keep practising these tasks till I get it right next year, and for the other years coming up.

Tony found his chosen tasks to be suitable (8 or 9) though some were difficult: being balanced, being patient and getting to a higher level (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations).

Throughout the counselling process Tony gained confidence in his ability to make a change, going from a 5 to a 9 out of 10.

V: So what does the 9 tell about you, about your confidence to make a change in your life?
T: Self-esteem, after session 3 my self-esteem built, I started to change a little, not in a bad way, I keep my personality, I changed my ways as in education, and I’m pretty confident in myself and what I do. (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful)

Case Analysis: Tony

Following, is a brief summary of the findings from this case in relation to the four themes

Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations reveal appropriate between-session tasks. All of Tony’s tasks emerged from our collaborative conversations. They related specifically to aspects of his goals. Interestingly, his chosen tasks were quite broad and did not vary much from week to week. He found his tasks were suitable even though some of them were difficult. Confidence measures were good indicators to me of how difficult Tony thought the task would be and gave insight into his situation. The difficulty of the task did not appear to create any barrier for Tony, perhaps because it was what he wanted to do.

Theme 2: Whose suggestion? Tony suggested all his tasks. There was never any hesitation with suggesting a task and Tony seemed quite certain about what he wanted to focus on. This showed his engagement in the process and his motivation to find change. I felt that Tony was directing the process of change by suggesting his own tasks that were important and suited to him. Tony would have been happy to try tasks that I suggested to see if they worked, however, he felt the best way was for us to both agree on a suitable task. He spoke in a way that acknowledged the collaborative nature of our counselling.

Theme 3: Follow-up about between-session tasks is helpful. In most sessions, Tony talked about his progress before I could ask. I asked about his between-session tasks if they had not come up in conversation. Tony found this follow-up a helpful reminder of what he needed to keep focused on to progress towards his goals. He did not seem to think my asking made him
more focused on the task and more likely to try. From my counsellor perspective, I found that follow-up gave more opportunity for amplification of successes or further solution-building. For example, Tony was able to recognise that doing well for two out of five days was a success to be celebrated.

**Theme 4: Between-session tasks are helpful.** Trying things between sessions had been helpful for Tony. The ‘What’s better?’ question was often linked with Tony’s success between-sessions. The specific focus on a task often allowed for a specific measure of success and progress which was helpful. Tony’s self-esteem and sense of agency had grown over our time working together. Tony also talked about how he was thinking about his between-session task and planning on continuing to do them in the years following. It seemed to me that the dialogues we had and the between-session tasks that followed supported Tony’s thinking. He could see specific things that he was able to do to effect a change in his situation. The future was looking bright – he knew what to do and had confidence to do it.

**Counsellor learning from this case**

1. Scaling provides useful measures for a number of different things in a session: measures of progress towards goals, measures of confidence and perceived ability to do tasks, and measures of moments of success. In this case, Tony used scaling without any prompting to express where he was at.

2. Suggestions for between-session tasks made by the client are preferable because the client knows what is most important for him/her at that moment and the counsellor may not.

3. There is always something that is useful to amplify in a task that the client does not think they have succeeded in –small successes. Following up on between-session tasks reveals this important information.
4. Broad goals are suitable when co-constructive conversations have highlighted specific details – the client knows what to do. (For example, in this case the task of “being patient” had been deconstructed in detail during the session.)

5. Difficult tasks are still useful if they are what the client wants and has chosen.
CHAPTER NINE

Evan

Evan is a 15 year old, Pasifika, high school student. He was keen to come to counselling to get some support with managing his anger. Evan had recently been in an incident where he had punched and smashed the window in a door at school because he was angry. Outbursts of anger were common for Evan and he had developed a bit of a reputation amongst his peers. He had been to counselling about his anger previously so already knew quite a lot about what was helpful. Evan is a friendly, kind-hearted young man with a good sense of humour. He wants to do the right thing.

Session 1

Problem. Evan sometimes responded inappropriately when he was angry. At times he was threatening and violent and had damaged property. Evan rated himself a 5 out of 10 for managing himself when he was angry. He had already improved, but still had a way to go.

Goals: Keeping away from trouble and managing himself. When managing himself, Evan will (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations):

- Be calm and stay cool – friends will help
- Walk and breathe to calm down
- Think of others
- Keep away from trouble and others that make him angry
- Have a good reputation
- People won’t be scared

Evan was able to recount how he had successfully managed himself well when he was angry which included: walking, getting fresh air, breathing and going aside from the problem (Theme1: Co-constructive conversations). After the break and giving feedback to Evan about
what we had talked about and what he was doing well, I invited him to suggest something to work on between sessions (Theme 2: Suggestions):

\[V: \text{...Because you are wanting to stay away from trouble and manage yourself, I am wondering if you have got anything that we have talked about today that you think that “oh that could be good for me to remember or to try”. Have you got anything that has come to mind today?}\]

\[E: \text{Not really. I’m not really good at thinking. I’m good at planning other things.}\]

Evan did not have any ideas so I suggested a task that used the skills he had used before to manage himself:

\[V: \text{Well I’m wondering whether this week, if something comes up (that makes him feel angry), that you do what has worked for you in the past, that you ask for some chill time and go out and do your walking and breathing...}\]

There was not enough time to ask for confidence measures as it had been a long first session.

**Counsellor/researcher comment.** I found this session challenging. Evan had already improved with managing his anger but still had significant outbursts or was angry about something “everyday”. As a novice counsellor, I had not had this kind of issue before and I wondered what the best approach was for this case. It appeared to me that some of Evan’s angry outbursts were a result of his inner turmoil and thinking about things. Evan could only practise managing himself appropriately when he felt angry, so I wondered what were appropriate suitable small steps that he could take each week between-sessions. I proceeded with this tension in mind. The between-session task I suggested emerged from Evan’s past successes (exceptions) and goals (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations). Evan did not suggest a task in this first session and I wondered whether coming up with an idea may be
difficult for some clients because they are learning about the counselling process and how we work together, or perhaps they are not confident, or they have no ideas (Theme 2: Suggestions). A confidence measure would have helped me know if the task was appropriate and well received by Evan.

Session 2

Evan reported that it had been a “smooth week” with “no violence”. He reported that he had managed himself in a game, where he had got hurt, by going for a long walk and doing his breathing which was his specific between-session task (Theme 3: Follow-up).

E: I moved away from the game and walked around the school five times.

Again, we explored exceptions: times when Evan coped and managed himself in difficult situations. At home, Evan had listened to music and sung to calm himself down, and when the pressure was really great at times he had cried. He restrained himself from hurting his “annoying” brother because he was caring and because he realised that his brother was young and would be more responsible when he got older (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations).

I suggested another between-session task at the end of this session that related to our discussion:

V: ...Because you are wanting to keep away from trouble and keep managing your anger, I am suggesting that you do what you did, that you keep yourself calm by singing and playing your music like you said...You are already doing a whole lot, and perhaps talking to Mum is helpful as well. Yeah? Do you think you might be able to do that? (Theme 2: Suggestions)

Here I needed to wait for a response from Evan but instead carried on to finish the session.
**Counsellor/researcher comment.** I considered that this task was suitable because they were ideas that came from Evan’s own successes and it was encouraging him to do more of what works. It would have been helpful to gauge Evan’s level of confidence to be able to carry on doing this and I would have liked to invite suggestions from Evan before I suggested anything of my own suggestions. Throughout this session I was intentional about building Evan’s sense of agency by amplifying all his coping strategies and complimenting his many wonderful qualities. I considered that he needed to see himself differently and know that he was able to manage himself.

**Session 3**

Evan rated his self-management for most of his week at an 8. (He had had one violent blow up at a student who he mistakenly thought stole his cell phone.) It was helpful for Evan to be able to recognise that one mistake does not ruin a whole week that was full of successes. Things were better at home and Evan was less frustrated with his brothers. At an earlier time, Evan had talked to his Mum about his frustrations when looking after his brothers and he reported that this week things were better because his mum had been helping out getting the brothers to do their bit. Consequently, Evan had not needed to use his between-session task of listening to music and singing to keep himself calm. It was useful to amplify how helpful it had been for him to talk to his mother about his difficulties.

Drawing from earlier discussions about what would have helped Evan manage the cell phone incident when he had hit another student, I suggested the between-session task of talking to someone, a teacher, or his mother, when he was in a difficult situation. This came from Evan’s idea about what would have helped in that instance (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations).
**Counsellor/researcher comment.** Even though Evan had not needed to use his between-session task during the week, I did wonder whether things at home and Evan’s self-management may have improved as a result of our co-constructive conversations. In Evan’s case, between-session tasks were only useful when they were needed and could only be practised when certain situations arose. I hoped that highlighting the specific skills that Evan could use would be helpful and reinforce wise choices in the future.

**Session 4**

Evan rated himself a 9 for managing and keeping away from trouble.

*V:* What does that 9 mean to you? What makes it a 9 this week? That looks pretty high.

*E:* Everything was all good. No problems, no fighting, no arguments. I’ve been busy with my sport. That is what I want.

Evan went on to describe how things were still better at home, that he was being patient and that his brothers were not as annoying:

*V:* What have you been doing for there not to be fighting?

*E:* Just turn my music on and clean the house...

*V:* So you get busy with what you are meant to be doing?

*E:* Yeah, gardening, biking, going to training and going to games.

*V:* All of that exercising gets that energy out, sometimes when you have felt angry, exercising gets all your tension and all your stress out.

*E:* Yeah and it makes you tired and it doesn’t make you feel like doing anything.
Evan had used his music and exercising to help – not the between-session task specific for the week but something that he had talked about in earlier sessions. This gave me opportunity to amplify how helpful Evan’s choices were (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

Evan did have one incident during the week when he felt angry when confronted by a teacher about his non-regulation cap. He used his strategies of listening to music and going for a run before returning to class.

My follow-up on the previous week’s between-session task revealed that Evan had not needed to talk to anyone about difficult situations during the week (Theme 3: Follow-up).

We reviewed our goals during this session and Evan thought that not getting angry so often was now more important than managing himself when he was angry. This was a pleasing development from his original goal. We went on to look at Evan’s character strengths and the things that were important to him. I thought that this might broaden our perspective and draw out some important values that Evan had that could help him achieve his goals.

*V:* *For you to move towards your goal, I am wondering whether you could use any of those strengths to help you.*

*E:* *I say loving and caring ‘cos there is a lot of people I help and I care for them and when people have problems they talk to me.* (Theme 3: Suggestions)

Evan answered this question quickly and enthusiastically. I did not fully understand how Evan thought this would help, however it was obviously significant for him, and the first between-session task that he had suggested.

**Counsellor/researcher comment.** At this stage, it was unclear to me whether following up on between-session tasks was useful or not. When I did enquire about between-session tasks it did not appear to make Evan feel uncomfortable – it was all part of our process. It was
concerning to me that Evan still got angry regularly, however he was using his skills to manage himself which was what his original goal was and now he was wanting to become angry less often as well, which was a pleasing development. It was important here that Evan came to this realisation himself and not through my imposing it on him.

Session 5

V: I am wondering what’s been good or successful this week?

E: There is only one problem that’s all…it’s always only one problem (said light-heartedly).

V: That means nearly the whole week was perfect, except for one little thing.

Evan explained about his difficult situation when he was annoyed with a boy during his friendly rugby game. After looking at ways that Evan might have handled things better, I turned the conversation back to what was working.

V: Can you tell me all of those times that you have been managing yourself well this week.

Evan was able to recount numerous times in the week when he was calm and keeping his cool: when he had lost his rugby game, when he was hanging with friends, when he played volleyball, when he was joking around in class and when he was out to dinner with his family.

V: You were going to use your strength of loving and caring to keep you near your goal and to keep you in a good place. Have you thought about that this week – being that loving person and that caring person? Has it crossed your mind at all this week?

(Theme 3: Follow-up)
Evan shared how he had used his strength of loving and caring between sessions when he was helping an auntie and her baby at a family occasion. This was something that Evan excelled at and felt “happy” about. It did not appear to me that he had intentionally practised or thought about his between session task of using his strengths of loving and caring.

V: Was that something that you actually did think of – the thing about loving and caring. Was it something that you thought about or did you just do it anyway.

E: I just did it anyway.

It was unclear to me how this was useful in achieving Evan’s goal, nevertheless it was important because Evan thought it was significant.

In this session, Evan rated himself at a 9 which for him was ‘good enough’. Though he was still getting angry at times, he felt that he was managing himself appropriately in difficult circumstances, which was his original goal.

We had further discussions highlighting more of Evan’s strengths and then went on to talking about another strategy where Evan could assess a difficult situation, and ask himself if there was something he could do about it: if not, he would let it go, and if he could do something, he would decide what he could do and when he would do it.

V: I am going to suggest that this week, if you have a frustrating moment that you ask yourself that question. Do you think you might be able to do that? How confident are you that you could ask that question, “Can I do something about it”? 

E: Probably always

V: Out of 10 how confident?

E: 8
Counsellor/researcher comment. Enquiring about Evan’s between-session task highlighted Evan’s strengths and built on the positive. Through our working together I hoped that Evan would be building a picture of himself as able and in control, even though most weeks he seemed to have had “one problem”. Looking from a broader perspective at other parts of Evan’s life, using a specific strengths focus, seemed to be helpful and brought a positive and affirming feel to our work together. This was the final session for my research. Further work with Evan would involve working towards his new goal of not getting angry as often; that is, staying calm in difficult situations.

Final Interview

Evan said he only thought about the between-session tasks when he needed to use them. He did however think about being loving and caring towards his friends every day during the week (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful).

E: Yes...just that one ...loving and caring...cos the other ones just come in when they have to...when I feel a little bit angry or pissed off or something then it just pops into my brain, time to breathe or walk, chill or just sing.

For Evan, the between-session tasks were useful when needed, and were not things that could be deliberately practised.

Evan found that it helped that we had talked about things to do between sessions.

E: It made it easier, it made it easier to get to my goal. (Theme 4: Tasks are helpful)

He had noticed that I followed up on his between-session tasks, however he did not feel that it made him try any harder, but it did serve as a reminder of what was helpful (Theme 3: Follow-up):
E: No cos when you ask it’s like trying to make me remember something like you are saying to me to, “Don’t forget remember what you are supposed to do”.

He found his tasks manageable and suitable for him (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations):

E: Yes I think they fit me cos some I just can’t do, like this one is like...there is that point where I can do it, that is why I chose some of those, that is why I do it, if I didn’t know what to do I wouldn’t do it.

Evan did not feel that it made much difference as to who suggested the tasks.

E: It would probably be the same cos everyone knows what to do the first time they get it...so it’s either you or me say. It is probably the same. (Theme 2: Suggestions)

He also showed a willingness to do a task no matter who suggested it. The tasks he referred to were his own ideas about what had worked in the past, so there were no barriers to engaging with them (Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations and Theme 2: Suggestions).

E: I will just do it...cos those are the easy ones cos it’s easy to use... go for a walk, or go chill, sit down in a tree or just walk around and sing.

Evan felt that he had grown in confidence in his ability to manage himself.

E: I’ll say that... it was ...I never knew it was that simple, but I thought it would be hard to get there but I didn’t think the whole thing through, so I never knew until now that it was that easy to almost get to your goal.

Evan reported that his confidence level had gone from 3 to 10. His thinking had been supported throughout our collaborative process and his strengths and useful strategies had been highlighted.
**Researcher/counsellor comment.** This final interview was extremely useful for me and gave me understanding about Evan’s thinking which I found hard to follow at times. The counselling process in this case had been less structured. It was not as linear and clear-cut as other cases, and to be honest I got distracted with Evan’s weekly incidents that seemed quite significant to me. Though we always worked together in a solution-focused way and did not overly focus on the problem, but rather on solutions and strategies, I found my concern about Evan’s outbursts and his being angry often prevented me from recognising the good that was happening for Evan. As I reflected back, I could see how Evan’s confidence in his ability to self-manage had grown and how his life was full of positives and successes nearly all the time. Trusting the process and letting Evan lead with his goals allowed him to get to where he wanted to be, and, to be ready to take the next step of working on not feeling angry “every day”. This was important for him to come to, and not for me to direct him to.

In other cases, there was more reporting back about between-session tasks that would result in more amplification of strengths during each session. Evan’s case, with his particular presenting issue, showed that not all tasks were able to be engaged with between any two sessions, however, over a number of sessions there was opportunity for him to engage with tasks when appropriate. Nevertheless, highlighting his strategies and strengths appeared to be useful reminders for him.

Throughout our time together, I considered that Evan and I developed a strong therapeutic relationship where he felt accepted, affirmed and able to share freely. The positive effect of this relationship on outcomes cannot be underestimated.

As a novice counsellor, I hope to develop my skills further to work more effectively with these kinds of cases and issues, and to be able to co-construct useful between-session tasks that support clients’ progress towards their goals.
Case Analysis: Evan

**Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations reveal appropriate between-session tasks.**

Between-session tasks emerged out of collaborative conversations. In this case, tasks were mostly from Evan’s experiences of what had worked in the past. Because they were from his own experience, they were seen to be appropriate and manageable, “*the easy ones*”. Evan had engaged with the tasks when needed, not in a systematic way between each session. He had not really thought about them much, only when they “*popped*” into his brain as they were needed.

**Theme 2: Whose suggestion?** It did not matter to Evan who suggested the task, only that it related to what he wanted to do. If the between-session tasks were from collaborative conversations then for Evan there seemed to be “*no difference*” as to whose suggestion it was. There did not appear to be any barriers to trying suggested tasks but rather a willing attitude to this possibility.

My experience as a counsellor was that I often wondered about the usefulness of my suggested task. I wondered if there was a more suitable one and if I was picking what was most appropriate for my client. When Evan spontaneously chose his own task I felt confident that it was meaningful to him and that he was motivated and engaged in the process.

**Theme 3: Follow-up about between-session tasks is helpful:** Following up on between-session task for this case was useful in that it served as a reminder for Evan of what he planned to do when managing himself even if he had not had opportunity to engage with his task during the week. My asking did not reveal much extra information that I was able to amplify, but it did reinforce the usefulness of Evan’s strategies and celebrated successes when they had occurred. I observed that my inquiring did not appear to create any discomfort for Evan or sense of failure.
**Theme 4: Between-session tasks are helpful.** It seemed that between-session tasks were helpful. Having them highlighted and talked about meant that they were in the fore-front of Evan’s mind and that he was able to use them when they “popped” into his head. Evan’s confidence had increased (from 3 to 10) as a result of him being able to achieve the things that he had wanted: that is manage himself by using his strengths and strategies. It was evident that Evan’s thinking processes had improved and he expressed more certainty of what he needed to do to have success.

*E: I have got the confidence to do almost anything, good enough for me to pass anything.*

**Counsellor learning from this case**

1. Nothing is all negative – therefore, keep focusing on the positive and amplify what is working.
2. Even though the process appears less-structured there can be lots of things going well.
3. Not all tasks can be engaged with between consecutive sessions but may be over a number of sessions.
4. If a between-session task appears significant to the client, go with it.
5. Following up on how tasks went can provide useful reminders of client strategies.
6. Not all issues suit between-session tasks as easily.
7. The therapeutic relationship is vital for positive outcomes. For this case, which was not quite so straight forward, I felt that having a strong therapeutic relationship helped build Evan’s confidence and view of himself as being competent.
CHAPTER TEN

Research Findings and Cross Case Analysis

Findings have been analysed within each case and, in this chapter, they are compared across all four cases to gain a fuller understanding of similarities and differences regarding between-session task co-construction and client experience (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 2006). These findings are discussed below in relation to the themes.

Theme 1: Co-constructive conversations reveal appropriate between-session tasks

All between-session tasks emerged out of collaborative, co-constructive conversations during counselling sessions. These were directly related to clients’ goals or were related to exceptions when clients had experienced some success. The between-session tasks emerging from exceptions usually required clients to utilise the same skill or strategy that they had used before to make things better. For example, Carly had used her knowledge of how to introduce an interesting topic to the group, and Lane and Tony had both used their knowledge of how to engage in class better: all things that they had done successfully before.

Three clients found the between-session tasks to be suitable and manageable for them in their particular situation. Tony however had set himself three tasks that though suitable, were quite challenging. There was a high level of acceptance and engagement with tasks which is likely to be due to them being closely related to client goals. With the exception of Evan, clients had engaged significantly with their tasks and had remembered what they were from week to week. Evan was not able to engage with his tasks each week: he used them when needed.

The use of a scale to measure client confidence in their ability to be able to do a task was useful feedback for me as the counsellor, especially when I had suggested the task and was wondering whether I had got it ‘right’. I also considered that my asking about their
confidence further reinforced clients’ efforts to do something between sessions and placed a positive expectation that they would.

**Theme 2: Whose suggestion? “…being honest, I would rather make it my own ideas…”**

There was some variation between clients about what was preferable with regard to who should suggest the between-session tasks. All my clients except Tony had experienced suggesting their own task and me suggesting a task. Lane expressed that he would rather suggest his own ideas rather than use my suggestions, however, Carly, Evan and Tony were less concerned about whose suggestion it was and showed a willingness to do a task regardless of who suggested it. This difference may have been due to the different interactions that I had in counselling. Lane was very thoughtful about his progress and on one occasion he had experienced my ‘interfering’ with his very good suggestion, so may have had more of an opinion on this. Still, it was of interest to me that Lane showed willingness to do my suggested task, and in fact did very well with it.

This accepting attitude suggests to me that clients were happy with the tasks because they had come from what they had said they wanted during the session. Tasks were co-constructed through collaborative conversations exploring client goals and abilities and were seemingly appropriate for each client. Lane’s comment about having his own ideas may be an indicator of what is preferable in a solution-focused counselling session.

My experience of the suggestion process was that I felt far more comfortable when clients suggested their own tasks because I was more confident that what they chose was important for them, and that it would be manageable. When a client suggested their own task it relieved me of any worry I might have about selecting an appropriate task for them. Giving clients the first opportunity to suggest something felt more respectful and honouring of them as they worked to find solutions in their situation. If I went ahead and set the homework I
would feel like I was being the boss or the expert. Inviting suggestions reflected the client-led process and my view that people know what is best for them and can therefore find their own solutions. The ideal appears to be to have the client suggest their own between-session task, as Tony and Lane did, however, when no suggestion is offered then counsellor suggestions that draw from co-constructive conversations that are aligned with client goals, exceptions and strengths are appropriate. A measure of client confidence gives a quick indication of how appropriate counsellor suggestions are.

I did not sense any client unease or resistance towards trying tasks and I expect that this was because tasks came from clients own ideas. With this age-group of participants there seemed to be a willingness to cooperate and try something even if it was not their suggestion.

**Theme 3: Follow-up about between-session tasks is helpful.**

Often the ‘What’s better?’ question was quickly linked to client success with between-session tasks. This gave opportunity to amplify and highlight client strengths. In this research, I was interested to know whether it was helpful or not to review how tasks had gone if they had not come up in conversation. I wondered whether clients may feel pressured or put-on-the-spot by my asking how they went. I did not want clients to feel like they had failed or they had to obey and do their homework. Clients confirmed the usefulness of between-session task follow-up as expressed in their final interviews. They had all remembered that most weeks I asked how they went with their task, if it had not already been mentioned. Evan didn’t think my asking about the tasks made any difference to him engaging with his tasks between sessions. He felt that my asking was a reminder to him not to forget the things that he was meant to be doing. Lane and Tony both found it was useful to be reminded about what we had talked about and then to move on to the next thing. Tony alluded to how my enquiring about his between-session tasks kept him focused on what he was wanting to do, especially when he had lost a bit of determination. Lane said my asking didn’t make much
difference to him doing it, whereas Carly tried harder because she knew she would be talking about it with me.

In Evan’s case, not all tasks were able to be engaged with between sessions, however, over a number of sessions there was opportunity for him to engage with them. This highlighted the usefulness of following up on between-session tasks which provided reinforcement and reminders to clients of their previous successes and strategies that had worked in the past and would work again when the opportunity presented itself.

There was no expressed discomfort or negative feelings around my enquiring about between session tasks. This may be because most of the time clients had successfully engaged with these tasks and had positive feedback to give. I had also built a strong therapeutic alliance with my clients and consider that they felt affirmed and accepted. This would have worked to minimise any potential unease from these kinds of follow-up questions.

As the counsellor, my experience of this follow-up was that it allowed much more conversation about what was happening for my clients and gave opportunity to amplify successes more. Rich information and solution finding strategies may have been missed had I not asked. Overall the follow-up was helpful for my clients and useful for the therapeutic process, providing more valuable information.

**Theme 4: Between-session tasks are helpful**

Clients found that having between-session tasks was helpful. All clients except for Evan had intentionally thought about their between-session tasks during the week and had purposefully engaged with them. ‘What’s better?’ questions were often linked to a between-session task which shows how important it is to have some specific focus to measure progress with. Knowing they had progressed in a small area appeared to build confidence for each
client. With the exception of Evan, it was evident that clients had progressed in more areas than just those relating to their between-session tasks.

Each adolescent experienced a significant shift in self-confidence as a result of engaging with their between-session tasks and achieving their goals. Each young person was enthusiastic and hopeful for their future in relation to their specific concern.

All clients spoke of their thinking and knowing what to do. It appeared that their ability to think about solutions had improved and that they were taking their ideas forward into the future with confidence.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Discussion

Findings and the Literature

This research aimed to explore the process of between-session task co-construction in solution-focused counselling sessions with adolescents, and client experience of this process. Throughout the research I observed and reflected upon my own practice as a solution-focused counsellor, specifically, the way I talked about between session tasks with clients. To do this, I worked with four clients who volunteered to participate in my research as part of their counselling. In my interpretive analysis of each case, involving both the process and the client experience, four themes emerged which have been explored in detail and are discussed in this chapter alongside the literature. The research findings reflect and highlight much of what is found in the literature regarding between-session tasks. There are, however, extensions to the literature, largely in the form of client perspective and their experience of between-session task conversations, which provide fresh insights and understandings that may inform practitioners working with clients to design useful between-session tasks. In this section, findings are discussed alongside the literature.

Co-constructive conversations reveal appropriate between-session tasks

Tasks are related to goals or exceptions. Each between-session task, for all four clients, emerged from co-constructive conversations during the counselling sessions. Clients’ tasks were either part of their desired future goals, or were something they had done before that had worked. For example, Carly tried to initiate conversations that she could be part of, and Lane and Tony both focused on specific ways to engage more in class – something they wanted, and had successfully done before. The collaborative, co-constructive conversations helped clients to reflect on their past successes and see that they were able to take steps that would change their current situation and get them more of what they were wanting (Brott,
HOMEWORK TASKS

2001). This finding supports the view of De Jong and Berg (2012) that tasks should come from something that the client has said (O'Connell, 2012). Guterman (2006) also emphasises the importance of the counselling process which prepares the clients and assists them to think about possible solutions or steps they can take towards change: that is, things to do between sessions. The co-constructive conversations amplified specific aspects of client goals as well as past successes and things that have helped, which opened possibilities for suitable between-session tasks that fitted each client (De Jong & Berg, 2012).

**Tasks are appropriate.** The literature suggests that when co-constructive conversations guide the between-session tasks, clients are more likely to see tasks as appropriate and in line with their preferred outcomes (De Jong & Berg, 2012; Duncan et al., 2004). In my study, clients reported that their tasks were appropriate and manageable in the context of their situation which supports this view. Carly expressed that her tasks were what she wanted, that is, they were aligned to her goals and Evan said, “Yes I think they fit me”. Furthermore, all clients rated (using a scale) the ease of their tasks quite highly. The exception to this was Tony who had high expectations for himself and wanted to improve to a higher level and to be patient with Mr X. Though both tasks were of his choosing and were appropriate for him, they were however, not easily manageable as reflected in his rating.

**Scaling.** Scaling to measure clients’ confidence in their ability to be able to do a task provided helpful information about clients’ perceived confidence, the ease of the task, and/or their motivation, especially for therapist suggested tasks. Tony’s ‘6’ expressed the challenge he was giving himself by wanting to reach a higher level. From a counsellor perspective, confidence scales helped me to stay in tune with clients’ perspectives and to gauge whether there might be any barriers to engaging with tasks (Davis & Osborn, 1999). Sharry et al. (2012) note how using scales to ask about motivation can give opportunity to glean extra information about the client and their situation. Solution-focused texts recommend this kind
of scaling (De Jong & Berg, 2012; Hanton, 2011; Sharry et al., 2012) however, there is little else in the research concerning the use of scales for measuring confidence or motivation with between-session tasks. Thus, these findings make a significant contribution to this literature.

Engagement with tasks. As a result of tasks appearing appropriate and manageable, clients adopted a high degree of engagement or compliance with them (de Shazer et al., 2007). Each week clients had thought about their tasks and endeavoured to engage with them. It appeared that barriers to engagement were minimised due to tasks being what clients wanted and based on their ideas. This fits with Metcalf’s (2008) view that “…when people feel like experts in their own lives, they are more likely to follow through with their own ideas” (p. 16). In other more therapist directed models, a reason tasks are not accomplished is that they are unfamiliar to the clients and therefore take more effort and thinking to accomplish (Trepper et al., 2013). Tasks fitted the clients which was evidenced in their high level of engagement with them (Lipchik, 2014).

In terms of outcomes associated with the accomplishment of between-session tasks, the literature suggests engagement with between-session tasks is linked with positive therapeutic outcomes (Kazantzis & L’Abate, 2007; Scheel et al., 2004). This was evidenced in my study: each young person engaged with their between-session tasks and experienced excellent outcomes. Carly had practised making conversation, Tony and Lane had focused on specific tasks that helped them at school and Evan had used tasks when needed to manage himself. According to their testimony, each one of them achieved their goals to a level that was ‘good enough’, and in addition to this, had grown in confidence in their ability to make changes in their situation. These results support the findings in the current literature that links engagement with between-session tasks with positive therapeutic outcomes (Kazantzis & L’Abate, 2007). My research provides further evidence that supports Detweiler-Bedell and Whisman’s (2005) finding that clients who have greater involvement in the homework
assigning process experience better therapeutic outcomes. Each client was involved in the collaborative process that revealed appropriate tasks, and each client experienced positive therapeutic outcomes.

**Whose suggestion? “Being honest I would rather make it my own ideas…”**

The question of who should suggest the task, and does it make any difference, was of interest to me from the outset of my research. While Trepper et al. (2013) suggest that “What is preeminent is that the assignments come from the client” (p. 28), there has been little research investigating client perceptions and preferences regarding this suggestion process. Lane articulated his preference very clearly: “being honest I would rather make it my own ideas”. He liked to have the control and make the decisions regarding between-session tasks rather than use my ideas. This client perspective gives support to the view of many solution-focused therapists who consider that allowing the client to lead in this way is consistent with solution-focused client-led practice (Hanton, 2011; Lipchik, 2002). However, not all solution-focused therapists invite the client to lead in this part of the process, instead they may suggest an appropriate task for the client to try based on what clients have said during the session (Macdonald, 2011).

Trepper et al. (2013) note that when clients direct their own tasks they will most often assign themselves something that they really want to do or more of what has worked before. This was evident in my research where clients suggested tasks that they wanted to do, and would be able to manage. As part of my counselling practice, I invited clients to suggest their own tasks and only when they did not have any ideas did I suggest something that was related to what they had already talked about and wanted. O’Connell (2012) advises that the most appropriate tasks to suggest are those related to client’s goals or exceptions. When there is no clear vision or clients have few ideas of what could make things better it is important to suggest easy tasks to clients (*ibid, 2012*). This was the situation with Carly. I gave her a
noticing task in the first session because she was lacking in ideas of what could help. In subsequent sessions, I still needed to suggest a task but I was able to align them with her past successes and her goals: what she wanted. As her confidence grew, Carly began to set her own tasks.

In Tony’s case, he set a task that he wanted, however, the task he chose was very difficult for him. It was important here that Tony had control and not me. A client setting their own difficult task has less impact on the therapeutic process and relationship than if it were the therapist setting a difficult task. Tony engaged with his difficult tasks between sessions making some progress towards his goals. This supports the view that if it is the client’s idea they are more likely to engage with the task (Trepper et al., 2013).

Other clients were less concerned about who suggested the tasks, largely because the tasks flowed from what they discussed in the counselling sessions and were what they wanted. For example, Evan said, “it’s either you or me…it is probably the same” and Carly noted “you just thought my thing that I wanted…you just thought my thoughts”. As noted, when using solution-focused practice, a counsellor uses co-constructive conversations to understand the clients’ perspective and to be able to facilitate suitable between-session task choices that are aligned with the clients’ goals (De Jong & Berg, 2012; Duncan et al., 2004). For the adolescents in my study, there appeared to be a willingness to try my suggestions if they did not have any. This is likely to be due to the collaborative process that enabled me to suggest suitable between-session tasks that were aligned to client goals. In summary it appears that the ideal is to have the client suggest their own tasks, and if that does not happen then counsellor suggested tasks that relate to client goals and strengths, that have been discussed in the counselling sessions, are acceptable to clients. As Carly said, “You thought my thoughts”, which indicated that it was not really an issue for her whose suggestion it was only that it was what she wanted.
Follow-up about between-session tasks is helpful.

Follow-up is generally not advised in solution-focused practice. The view of De Jong and Berg (2012) and Hanton (2011) is that it is the clients’ own choice to follow through with therapist suggestions and that asking about them may put clients in an awkward position if they have not engaged with their tasks. In contrast, follow-up discussions about homework are recommended in other approaches: predominantly cognitive-behavioural therapies (Nelson et al., 2007). I found in my study that following up on between-session tasks was useful for clients and for the therapeutic process. This is in line the view of Trepper et al. (2013) who suggest that a therapist may check how the between-session task went but would be advised not to dwell on it if it is not used. Their rationale for this suggestion is that it is respectful to believe that a client will have good reasons for not using the task. In my study, clients did not express any negative feelings about being asked how their task went. This may be due to the fact that they had all engaged well with most of their tasks and experienced good success so did not feel any sense of failure.

Furthermore, from my counsellor perspective I found it very helpful to hear about how clients had gone with their tasks. When they talked about doing the task, they often revealed more rich information about their situation. Such rich information could then form the basis of more collaborative conversation about client goals and progress. Sometimes clients had just forgotten about their efforts and successes, so I consider that asking was extremely important for the therapeutic process. Herrero de Vega and Beyebach (2004) found that deconstructing clients’ reports of no improvement often led to them being able to recognise some improvement - that is, not everything was negative. My findings support the value of deconstructing clients’ reports about between-session tasks. Lane viewed that he had not done so well at getting to school, however, after talking about it, he was able to see his relative success rather than failure. Similarly, even though Carly had not found a
conversation that she was interested in or wanted to join, exploring this further revealed a useful next step task of thinking about an interesting conversation starter. I wonder what would have been lost if I had not enquired. This is supported by Quick (2012) who points out that whatever the response to between-session tasks is, it always provides useful information about the client and their situation.

For Carly, having the extra accountability, knowing that she would be asked about her between-session task, made her increase her efforts. The other clients reported that follow-up did not make a difference to their efforts, however, they found it useful to review what they had been working on. Lane expressed, “Yeah it was better because we can go back to what we had already done and once we had talked about that we could carry on again…” The boys all thought that reviewing tasks helped them stay focused on what was helpful or what their strategies were.

When there is a strong therapeutic relationship, discussions regarding between-session tasks may not be as threatening or uncomfortable. When clients feel accepted and affirmed there is less likelihood that they will experience a sense of failure for doing voluntary tasks or not. I noticed the potential for client unease when Lane felt he needed to give reasons about why he had not arrived at school early every day. In this second session, our relationship was still developing and Lane’s self-confidence and focus on what was working, rather than what was not working, was still being built. This illuminates how therapists need to be sensitive in this follow-up process, especially in earlier sessions. Enquiring with curiosity is consistent with the solution-focused approach. Findings in this research suggest that it is appropriate and beneficial to find out how things went with tasks in a curious, non-judgmental way (Trepper et al., 2013). It is just another part of the solution-focused therapeutic process.
**Between-session tasks are helpful.**

Clients all found that having between-session tasks was helpful for them in reaching their goals. Carly expressed, “Yeah it was the practise outside and it was the practises in class and yeah when you practise you get more confident”. Tony reported that he was continuing to use the tasks that he had suggested: “I’m still doing it. I’m still going off that page” (with the recorded between-session tasks). Findings in this research support the literature that suggests engaging with tasks maximises therapeutic outcomes and extends the benefits of therapeutic conversations (Detweiler-Bedell & Whisman, 2005; Kazantzis & L'Abate, 2007; Kazantzis et al., 2010; Scheel et al., 2004)

The ‘What’s better?’ question was often answered in relation to clients’ success with between-session tasks which showed how useful it was for them to have something to focus on. Clients seemed pleased to report that they had focused on that specific area and had made progress towards their goals. Carly was certain it was the between-session tasks that she had been able to do that had bit-by-bit built her confidence and helped her to achieve her goals: “…it builds me up each one, it is like a building block – up”.

**Between-session tasks provide a measure of progress.** Having small, specific between-session tasks allowed for a measurement of success, which in all cases provided clients with evidence of their positive progress towards their goals, which in turn built clients’ agency. This supports the literature that suggests outcomes are improved when clients are involved with discussions and tasks are “concrete, behavioural and measureable” (De Jong & Berg, 2012, p. 89; Detweiler-Bedell & Whisman, 2005). These measurements enabled clients to recognise even small steps which led to big changes: big changes in client confidence and in their situation. Furthermore, there was a flow on effect from doing something that works. Clients progressed in other areas of their lives also. For example, Lane organised his sleep schedule without it being part of a specific between-session task. Our co-
Constructive conversations extended far beyond the specific between-session task. These findings endorse the assertion of Bohart and Tallman (1999) and Hanton (2011) that clients do much more between sessions than the specific task to move towards their goals as a result of the collaborative conversations.

**Agency is increased: “When you practise you get more confident”**. Solution-focused counselling is promoted as an approach that empowers clients and allows them to gain confidence through experiencing some self-agency (De Jong & Berg, 2012). Findings in this study support De Jong & Berg’s (2012) view. Each young person had grown in self-confidence (reflected in their self-reported scales in their final interview) as a result of their successes working towards their goals. Tony spontaneously reported that, “this has taught me self-esteem”, and Carly declared that she had become more confident as she had practised. Each client had grown in confidence in their ability to effect change in their personal situation. As their situation improved due to their own efforts, so did their sense of competency and self-efficacy. Clients became more aware of their own resources (De Jong & Berg, 2012) and they felt empowered (Bohart & Tallman, 1999). Through co-constructive conversations, successes were highlighted and amplified in counselling sessions and then repeated between sessions with clients finding afresh that they did indeed know what to do to effect change (Guterman, 2006). Bandura writes that “unless people believe that they can produce desired affects and forestall undesired ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act” (Bandura, 2000, p. 75). This solution-focused approach draws out client successes and builds clients’ sense of agency resulting in them doing something that effects change in their situation (De Jong & Berg, 2012).

Despite the fact that some solutions were not connected with the problem, or were not useful immediately (Trepper et al., 2013), as in Lane and Evan’s case, outcomes were still positive for clients, and they gained confidence as a result of these outcomes. For example,
getting more sleep and eating breakfast was not directly related to Lane’s desire to be motivated at school, however they were significant steps for him to take in his solution building journey. This finding illustrates and supports the solution-focused tenet that solutions are not always connected to the problem (De Jong & Berg, 2012). Similarly, even though Evan could not practise tasks every week, he still found that highlighting strategies and things to do was useful and he used these ideas as needed.

**Thinking is supported.** Clients expressed that they were thinking about what they needed to do to have continued success. They had the answers themselves, and the counselling just helped bring those answers ‘to the front’ (Duncan et al., 2004). The literature suggests that adolescents can think and process well, but other factors such as feelings and social influences affect thinking and behaviour choices (Steinberg, 2007). In this research, clients’ thinking was activated and they decided on actions they wanted to take to move towards their goals before the time, which enabled them to make wise decisions when the time came. Their thinking moderated their behaviour. Tony was respectful towards a difficult teacher because he had chosen that action as his between-session task for the week. Thinking about his self-designed task caused him to moderate his behaviour and be respectful in a tough situation.

Collaborative, co-constructive conversations helped adolescents make connections between past successes and possible future actions. Self-agency was enhanced as clients remembered past successes (O’Connell, 2012). Lane could see how he was successful in Maths and could do more of what was working in other more challenging classes, and Carly was reminded how she was able to initiate good conversations and that she could do it again: she “thought about it (practising her tasks) a lot”. Their thinking was creating their future, evidenced by both Tony and Lane talking about how they were taking the between-session task strategies with them into the following year. Tony declared: “Well these tasks can lead
onto next year as well. I could just keep practising these tasks till I get it right next year, and for the other years coming up”. Similarly, Lane said, “Yeah I didn’t like school…but coming here and learning what I have to do and focus that has helped a lot to learn to be more prepared for next year and stuff…Just being able to know that I can do it, that I can progress just learn more stuff, especially in Science…learn...listen”. Hearing their enthusiasm about what had worked for them and seeing the change in self-confidence was hugely encouraging.

**Counsellor learning**

Clients’ experiences of between-session task conversations have provided me with some valuable learning. Clients’ comments have given me a better understanding of what works best for clients. For example, if I had not asked Lane about whose suggestion he preferred, I never would have learned that my suggestion was not so helpful, as it seemed to me that it was well received and engaged with, however Lane would rather have his own ideas. This encourages me to always check in with clients and ask how it is for them. As Manthei (2005) points out, what the client thinks is often different to what the therapist thinks. To maximise outcomes, regularly enquiring about the way we are working as therapists is essential and can be naturally incorporated into a solution-focused, client-led approach.

Suggested guidelines for discussing homework tasks were outlined earlier in the literature review (Nelson et al., 2007; Scheel et al., 2004; Strong & Massfeller, 2010) Observations of the way I worked with clients and findings of what worked for clients in this between-session task co-construction process are aligned with and support these suggestions of things to consider when discussing between-session tasks. The process I used was collaborative, tasks were most often explicit and aligned with client goals and resources, and barriers and confidence were discussed.
Through this research I have developed a stronger allegiance to the solution-focused approach to counselling, especially with adolescents. I find the approach very respectful and honouring of clients who know best what they need in their situation. I have gained a greater understanding of what was happening for me as the counsellor and for my clients as we made sense of the between-session task negotiation process. As I reflected on the counselling process and my interactions I was able to modify ways I communicated with clients and to develop my own expertise further (Bager-Charleson, 2014). The research has reinforced my view that between-session tasks are useful and do indeed maximise positive outcomes. I am also more inclined to see that the short reflective break in the session is helpful and adds impact and importance to the feedback that follows. A summary of specific learning and implications for practice relating to between-session tasks follows this discussion.

This study highlights how useful the solution-focused approach is for adolescents. Each young person lacked confidence when they first came and by the time we had finished they expressed that they were much more confident: a result of a strengths-based approach that affirms clients’ agency and ability to make changes. As these young people began to think about ‘what works’, it strengthened their resolve to do more of what worked, resulting in less impulsivity and better self-regulation as shown by their progress towards their goals (Steinberg, 2007; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006). Seeing their enthusiasm and their ‘can do’ attitude develop was very encouraging.

**Implications for Practice**

Considering the findings from clients’ experiences and from my observations regarding between-session task conversations, the following points are offered as helpful guides for practitioners co-constructing between-session tasks in solution-focused counselling sessions with adolescents.
• Build a strong therapeutic alliance with each client.

• Ensure between-session tasks have emerged from clients’ own specific goals and exceptions and draw on resources that the client already has. Use the client’s words.

• In the feedback, before deciding on a task, highlight client successes, exceptions and strengths, relating these back to client goals to prepare clients for ideas on possible tasks.

• Always invite client suggestions for between-session tasks first. Accept any task even if the link is unclear or tasks seem too small.

• Counsellor suggestions need to be easy and related to what the client has said they want: for example, a noticing or thinking task.

• Check perceived suitability or manageability of the task by using a confidence scale.

• Follow-up on tasks in each subsequent session with sensitivity and curiosity.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research

As with any research, there are strengths and limitations throughout the process. As the researcher and participant-counsellor, I worked hard to provide solution-focused counselling in a consistent and systematic way, considering what was best-practice for each client. I prioritised the building of a strong therapeutic relationship with clients, showing an interest in their lives apart from their counselling concern. I listened to audios of our counselling sessions, reflected, and when possible transcribed conversations prior to subsequent sessions. The use of multiple sources of data as outlined in the methodology chapter has increased the trustworthiness of this study. To minimise any researcher bias, I reviewed my data and my possible themes with peers and my supervisor who provided helpful feedback during the early stages of my analysis.
My researcher/counsellor identity has impacted on the study and on my relationship with clients. It must be acknowledged here that my counselling process, though adhering to a solution-focused approach, is unique because I bring my own personality, ways and expertise to each counselling session. It is hoped this is not a limitation, only a difference.

Consistent with qualitative research, this small group of participants yielded excellent in-depth information about the between-session task process and adolescent experiences. Each participant-client, though similar in age, brought their own unique personality, experience, cultural context and concern to counselling, making each case useful for study. The participant-clients were all volunteers and motivated for change and therefore engaged well with their between-session tasks. This may have created a rosy picture compared to what might have been for less motivated clients or clients that may have been referred. Client issues were also moderate in nature and I wonder whether the experience would be different with other presenting issues.

Reliability of feedback from participants, particularly in the final interview, may be seen as a limiting factor. Participants may have given what they perceived to be more favourable feedback concerning our process together in order to ‘help’ with my research. My questioning was consistent with solution-focused type questions where I was curious as to how it was for them. My sense is that they were honest in their assessment, since there were no right or wrong answers. I consider that the trusting relationship that we had built would have given them freedom to respond frankly.

Allowing participants to read and comment on my findings would have strengthened the study, however, due to my change of work place and the close of the school year it was not possible to communicate with them to get feedback about whether they felt I had accurately represented their words and views in the data and themes. It may be that with
consultation there could have been some adjustment of wordings or emphases (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

It is difficult to measure the exact influencers of engagement and change in counselling. There may be several factors that have influenced change: co-constructive conversations, between-session tasks, a positive therapeutic alliance and client factors that are unrelated to counselling. A strong therapeutic relationship has been shown to be essential to successful outcomes (Duncan et al., 2004; Lambert & Barley, 2001), therefore, it could be that client engagement with tasks and successful outcomes may be due to the rapport developed between myself as the counsellor and the client. This however does not negate the client perspective about their experience of between-session task co-construction and discussions relating to this specific part of the counselling process.

Further Research Directions

This is a first study to explore between-session task co-construction with adolescent clients using a solution-focused counselling approach. Participants in this study were aged between 13 and 15 years old. Older adolescents and adults, and those from different cultures may have different experiences. This research, involving two New Zealand European adolescents and two Pasifika adolescents, presents interesting information that may be further explored in future studies in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Research using other client populations with a variety of issues would add greater understandings to the literature about between-session task co-construction and client experience. It may be that some client concerns lend themselves better to using between-session tasks than others and as O'Connell (2012) suggests, that some groups of people prefer more therapist-led directives than others. It is suggested in this study that specificity regarding tasks is beneficial and allows for a degree of measurement of progress. Further research investigating the kinds of tasks (broad or specific) and their usefulness may be helpful. Finally, therapeutic alliance influences therapeutic
outcomes (Lambert & Barley, 2001). In this study it is unclear how much the therapeutic relationship affected client engagement with tasks and outcomes. It would therefore be of interest to understand more about how this relationship effects client engagement with between-session tasks and therapy outcomes. Incorporating measures of this, such as the Session Rating Scale (Duncan et al., 2004), could be a useful addition to such research.

Conclusion

This practice-based study has provided a small snapshot into how between-session tasks are co-constructed with adolescents, and how these adolescents experienced this process within solution-focused counselling sessions. Findings emerging from the data demonstrate that appropriate tasks are revealed through collaborative conversations and that client suggested tasks are most suitable and should be invited in the first instance. Following up on how a task went was seen to be useful and overall, between-session tasks were perceived by clients as helpful in moving them towards their goals, with clients developing greater self-confidence and clearer thinking throughout the process. This study makes a valuable contribution to the literature, adding the client voice to a subject that has largely relied on counsellor perspectives. The themes and understandings developed from the data analysis will hopefully inform practitioners about this specific part of the therapeutic process, both from a counsellor perspective and from the perspective of clients, and may be useful when working with clients to design suitable between-session tasks. Working effectively with clients in this area will ensure their therapeutic outcomes are maximised.
References


Appendix A: Ethics approval

HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Lynda Griffioen  
Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

Ref: HEC 2015/69

3 August 2015

Vicki Tanner  
School of Health Sciences  
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Vicki

The Human Ethics Committee advises that your research proposal “Homework tasks: an exploration into how between-session tasks are co-constructed with adolescents in solution-focused counselling sessions” has been considered and approved.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your email of 2 August 2015.

Best wishes for your project.

Yours sincerely

Lindsey MacDonald  
Chair  
University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee
HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Lynda Griffioen
Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

Ref: HEC 2015/69

20 August 2015

Vicki Tanner
School of Health Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Vicki

Thank you for your request for an amendment to your research proposal “Homework tasks: an exploration into how between-session tasks are co-constructed with adolescents in solution-focused counselling sessions” as outlined in your email dated 12 August 2015.

I am pleased to advise that this request has been considered and approved by the Human Ethics Committee.

Yours sincerely

Lindsey MacDonald
Chair, Human Ethics Committee
Appendix B: Simplified information sheet

**Counselling Research**

I am looking at my own counselling practice and how I work with clients to decide on between-session tasks

**Volunteers needed:** to come for counselling and participate in this research project

---

Do you have something you would like to change or make better?

RELATIONSHIPS MOTIVATION

ANXIETY STRESS

SCHOOL STUFF SLEEPING

---

Participants will be asked to:

- Attend one 10 minute introductory interview where I can explain what will be involved in the counselling/research.
- Attend 3-5 counselling sessions where you will have opportunity to talk about something in your life that you would like to be different. *(Sessions will be audio recorded.)*
- Gain parental consent to participate

**Confidential and anonymous:** All counselling is confidential and identities are kept anonymous in any publication.

---

INTERESTED?

Name__________________________________________Class_____

Please return to Vicki Tanner or Xx in the Guidance Department, or email tnr@xxx.school.nz

Counselling can help you work on something you want to make better
Appendix C: Information and consent forms

Vicki Tanner
Telephone xxx
Email: tnr@xxx.school.nz

Exploring solution-focused counselling practice: how between-session tasks are negotiated with adolescents

Information for participants

My name is Vicki Tanner and I am working as a counsellor here at Xx. Currently, I am studying for my Master of Counselling at the University of Canterbury. As part my study, I would like to conduct some counselling research here at Xx. I want to look at the ways I can talk about between-session tasks with young people. Doing something between counselling sessions helps people make positive steps towards their goals.

Counselling: Coming to counselling can help a young person work on something that they would like to change or improve. This might be about relationships, stress or anxiety, school issues, self-improvement or anything else.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to do the following:

- **Attend** a brief meeting with myself so that I can explain the research and the counselling process to you. (Counselling will be offered to all students whether they choose to be in the research or not.)

- **Gain parent/care-giver consent** to participate in the study.

- **Participate** in a maximum of five, 30 to 50 minute counselling sessions where you will have opportunity to talk about something in your life that you would like to be different. Sessions will be audio recorded.

- **Answer** 3 or 4 questions relating to the research topic at the end of the final counselling session.

**Participation is voluntary** and you can withdraw at any time if you change your mind providing it is before the analysis stage of the research. Any information about you will be destroyed. You may continue counselling if you wish without being part of the research, or you can continue counselling with another counsellor. If you choose to withdraw, you can do so by letting me or Sue Ingle, the Head of Guidance, know.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** All information related to your counselling and the research will be kept confidential. Your identity will be protected by using a pseudonym for your name and changing any details that could identify you or your school. I may at times need to discuss my work and review recordings with my counselling supervisor or my research supervisor. They will have the same confidentiality agreement as myself. Any information (audio recordings, counsellor notes and transcripts), will be stored securely in a password protected file on a password protected computer or in a locked filing cabinet at my home. Data will be the researcher’s property and will be destroyed after five years, as required by the University of Canterbury.
Results of the study: Results from this research may be useful to other counsellors providing them with new understandings about the process of between-session task negotiation and of strategies that can be used to help young people engage with tasks. Results will have no identifying information. They will be published and accessible on the University of Canterbury library database. If you wish, you can receive a report of the study by email.

Questions: If you have any questions or concerns at any time about the study please contact me (details above), my university supervisor Shanee Barraclough shanee.barraclough@canterbury.ac.nz  ph 364 2987 ext 3839, or the Head of Guidance, Xx, xx@xxx.school.nz, ph 03 xxx ext x. They will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about this project.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

If you are willing to participate in this study, would you please discuss this with your parents/caregivers. Please return signed consent forms to myself or Xx in the Guidance Department.

Thank you for considering participating in this research.

Vicki Tanner
Exploring solution-focused counselling practice: how between-session tasks are negotiated with adolescents

Consent form for participants

☐ I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

☐ I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in this research.

☐ I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty, providing it is before the analysis stage of the research. Any information and data will be destroyed if it is possible.

☐ I understand that counselling sessions will be audio recorded and that data will be stored securely, in a password protected file on a password protected computer at the researcher’s home and will be destroyed after five years. These recordings are the property of the researcher.

☐ I understand that care will be taken to reduce any risk of identification.

☐ I understand that all information will be kept confidential by the researcher and the identity of participants and school will be kept anonymous in any publication. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC library.

☐ I understand that I can receive a report on the findings of the study. I have written my email address below for the report to be sent to.

☐ I understand that I can contact the researcher, (details above), or her supervisor, Shanee Barraclough: shanee.barraclough@canterbury.ac.nz, ph 364 2987 ext 3839. If I have any complaints, I can contact the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

☐ By signing below, I agree to participate in this research and my parents/caregivers have also given consent on their consent form.

Full name_________________________________________Class__________

Signature_________________________________________Date___________

Email address for report_____________________________________________

Please return consent form in the sealed envelope to Vicki Tanner or Xx in the Guidance Department
Exploring solution-focused counselling practice: how between-session tasks are negotiated with adolescents

Information for parents/whanau/caregivers

Dear parents/whanau/caregivers

My name is Vicki Tanner and I am working as a counsellor at Xx. Currently, I am studying for my Master of Counselling at the University of Canterbury. As part my study, I would like to conduct some counselling research at Xx. I want to look at my own practice as a counsellor, specifically, at the ways I can talk about between-session tasks with young people. Doing something between counselling sessions helps people make positive steps towards their goals. I want to look at how these small between-session tasks can be talked about so that young people find them appropriate and therefore engage with them.

Counselling: Coming to counselling can help a young person work on something that they would like to change or improve. This might be about relationships, stress or anxiety, school issues, self-improvement, or anything else.

I am asking for your permission for your child to be involved in this counselling research as they are under 18 years old and it is a requirement of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee. If you agree for them to participate, they will be asked to do the following:

- Attend a brief meeting with myself so that I can explain the research and the counselling process to them. (Counselling will be offered to all students regardless of their involvement in the research.)

- Participate in a maximum of five, 30 to 50 minute counselling sessions where they will have opportunity to talk about something they would like to improve. Sessions will be audio recorded.

- Answer 3 or 4 questions relating to the research topic after the final counselling session is concluded.

Participation is voluntary and students can withdraw at any time should they change their mind, providing it is before the analysis stage of the research. Any information about them would be destroyed. Students may continue counselling without being part of the research, or they can continue counselling with another counsellor.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I will take particular care to ensure the confidentiality of all information related to students’ counselling and the research. Identities will be protected by using pseudonyms for names and changing any identifying details for both students and school. I may at times need to discuss my work and review recordings with either my clinical supervisor or my research supervisor. They will have the same confidentiality agreement as myself. Any information (audio recordings, counsellor notes and transcripts), will be stored securely in a password protected file on a password protected computer or in a locked filing cabinet at my home. It will be destroyed after five years, as required by the University of Canterbury.
Results of the study: Results from this research may be useful to other counsellors providing them with new understandings about the process of between-session task negotiation and of strategies that can be used to help young people engage with tasks resulting in improved outcomes. Results will have no identifying information. Results will be published and accessible on the University of Canterbury library database. Participants will receive a report of the study by email.

Questions: If you have any questions or concerns at any time about the study please contact me (details above), my university supervisor Shanee Barraclough shanee.barraclough@canterbury.ac.nz  ph 364 2987 ext 3839, or the Head of Guidance, Xx, ig@xxx.school.nz,  ph 03 xxx ext xx. They will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about this project.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

I can assure you that utmost care will be taken with regard to your child. I have professional support available to me if needed, both as a counsellor and a researcher.

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, would you please complete the attached consent form and give it to your child to return to me or Xx in the Guidance Department.

Thank you for considering this request.

Vicki Tanner
Exploring solution-focused counselling practice: how between-session tasks are negotiated with adolescents

Consent form for parents/whanau/caregivers

I have read the information sheet regarding the research project and have been given the opportunity to ask further questions of the researcher.

I understand what is required of my child should s/he agree to take part in the research.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that my child can withdraw at any time without penalty, providing it is before the analysis stage of the research, and, that any information and data will be destroyed if it is possible.

I understand that counselling sessions will be audio recorded and that data will be stored securely in a password protected file on a password protected computer at the researcher’s home and will be destroyed after five years. These recordings are the property of the researcher.

I understand that care will be taken to reduce any risk of identification.

I understand that all the information will be kept confidential by the researcher and that the identity of my child and the school will be kept anonymous in any publication. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC library.

I understand that my child can receive a report on the findings of the study.

I understand that I can contact the researcher, (details above), or her supervisor, Shanee Barraclough: shanee.barraclough@canterbury.ac.nz ph 364 2987 ext 3839. If I have any complaints, I can contact the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

By signing below, I agree to allow my child to participate in this research.

Name _________________________________________ Date ______________________

Signature ______________________________ Child’s name ______________________

Please return this consent form in the sealed envelope to Vicki Tanner or Xx in the Guidance Department
Exploring solution-focused counselling practice: how between-session tasks are negotiated with adolescents

Information for principal

Dear Xx

As previously discussed, I would like to conduct some counselling research at our school as part of my studies towards my Master of Counselling degree at Canterbury University. The research investigates my own practice as a Solution-focused counsellor working with adolescents. Specifically, I want to examine the ways between-session tasks are talked about and agreed upon with clients. Research indicates that between-session tasks work to maximise therapeutic outcomes for clients. However, there is little research looking at the actual process of how appropriate tasks are agreed upon in therapy sessions. My case study research will take an in-depth look at this process with the aim of understanding better how I can talk with my clients about between-session tasks and how we can co-construct appropriate tasks that they will engage with, and therefore, increase the benefits of their coming to counselling.

Students will be invited to volunteer as participants in this study. I hope to recruit 3 to 5 students. Volunteers will be required to commit to the following:

- Attend a brief introductory meeting so that I can explain the research and the counselling process to them, and, to gauge whether they will be suitable for the research. (Counselling will be offered to all students regardless of their involvement in the research.)

- Participate in a maximum of five, 30 to 50 minute, counselling sessions during school hours. Sessions will be audio recorded.

- Answer 3 or 4 questions relating to the research topic at the end of the final counselling session.

- Gain parent/caregiver consent to participate in the research.

Participation in this study is voluntary and students can withdraw at any time should they change their mind, providing it is prior to the analysis stage of the research. You also have the right to withdraw a student at any time. Data pertaining to individuals that withdraw will be destroyed if possible.

Anonymity of students and school is assured. In all transcripts, notes, presentations and publications, I will use pseudonyms for names and change any identifying details for both students and school. All information will be kept confidential; I may at times need to discuss my work and review recordings with either my clinical supervisor or my research supervisor. Should I use a transcriber, they will sign a confidentiality agreement also. Data (audio recordings, counsellor notes and transcripts), will be stored securely in a password protected file on a password protected computer or in a locked filing cabinet at my home. It will be destroyed after five years, as required by the University of Canterbury.
Results from this research may be useful to other therapists, providing a better understanding of the process of task negotiation and of strategies that can be used to help clients engage with between-session tasks, resulting in improved therapeutic outcomes. Results will have no identifying information. Results of this research will be published and accessible on the University of Canterbury library database. You and the participants will receive a report of the study by email.

If you have any questions or concerns at any time about the study please contact me (details above), my university supervisor Shanee Barraclough shanee.barraclough@canterbury.ac.nz ph 364 2987 ext 3839, or the Head of Guidance, Xx, xx@xxxxx.school.nz. They will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about this project.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee. If there are any complaints or concerns these can be addressed to The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

If you agree for your school students to participate in this study would you please complete the attached consent form and return it to me.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Vicki Tanner
Exploring solution-focused counselling practice: how between-session tasks are negotiated with adolescents

Consent form for school principal

I have read the information sheet regarding the research project and have been given the opportunity to ask further questions of the researcher at any time.

I understand what is required of students if they agree to take part in this research.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that students can withdraw at any time without penalty, and, that any information and data will be destroyed if it is possible.

I understand that students must have parental consent to participate in the study.

I understand that counselling sessions will be audio recorded and that data will be stored securely in a password protected file on a password protected computer at the researcher’s home and will be destroyed after five years.

I understand that care will be taken to reduce any risk of identification.

I understand that all information will be kept confidential by the researcher and the identity of participants and school will be kept anonymous in any publication. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC library.

I understand that participants and myself will receive a report on the findings of the study.

I understand that I can contact the researcher, (details above), or her supervisor, Shanee Barraclough: shanee.barraclough@canterbury.ac.nz ph 364 2987 ext 3839. If I have any complaints, I can contact the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

By signing below, I agree to allow students to participate in this research.

Name ______________________________________________________ Date________________

Signature____________________________________________________

Email for report_______________________________________________
Appendix D: Final interview questions

FINAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Reflective re-scale: How would you now rate your concern at the start of counselling and at the end.

Each week, after the break, we agreed on something for you to do between sessions to help you move towards your goal of X. e.g.... What was your experience of doing a between-session task? (Wanting to know whether they used between-session tasks, what helped them use them, were they helpful for moving towards goals and how were they helpful or not.)

Were the activities we agreed on something that you thought about during the week?

What helped you do them? Was there anything that made it difficult for you to do them?

Do you remember us talking about tasks the week following? Did that make a difference? (Wondering if attention to it in the next session was helpful to reinforce positive steps, and whether knowing they would be asked increased their motivation to engage with tasks.)

How did you find the specific tasks? (Remind them of their specific tasks - Were they suitable, manageable, appropriate, difficult, not relevant, not able to do?)

Some of the tasks you suggested and some I suggested e.g.... Which ones made it easier for you to think about or to do? (Wondering if there was a different feeling or engagement.)

What was it like for you when you were able to do what you had wanted (achieve goals)? (Looking for agency, success, self-belief.) How would you scale your confidence at the start and now
Appendix E: Research timetable

Research Timetable: Dates of counselling sessions and class visits 2015

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<th>T3 Wk7</th>
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