"I can do it": Exploring the Co-construction of Agency and Strengths through Solution-Focused Counselling with Adolescents

Georgina Cuttance

University of Canterbury

Research project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the

Degree of Master of Counselling, School of Health Sciences at the

University of Canterbury

March 2020

Abstract

Solution-focused therapy is a client-centred and strengths-based approach that aims to support clients to recognise and describe their own strengths, skills and resources that they can use to move towards their preferred future. It is a collaborative and hopeful approach, with a focus on the role of language to enhance the change process. This research explores how agency and strengths are co-constructed through solution-focused counselling with adolescents in a New Zealand secondary school setting. It is a practice-based research project, which focuses on two case studies that include data from solution-focused counselling sessions with three participants. Data from two clients have been merged into one case study. Qualitative research methods were used to explore the process of how agency and strengths were co-constructed and experienced by both the counsellor and clients through solution-focused counselling with adolescents. Video recordings of the sessions and session transcripts provided the basis of the data, alongside researcher observations and reflections. These were analysed using narrative analysis and presented in the findings as narrative case studies. The participant's narratives were presented in chapters of how agency and strengths were co-constructed and experienced. These were re-storied alongside session transcripts, counsellor reflections and literature to give the reader a sense of the solution-focused counselling process with each client. This wove together the voice of the clients, counsellor and the literature. The chapters of the client's stories of agency and strengths include: *Connection to self, Connection to Others, Connection to Future, Connection to What Helps, Connection to the Counselling Process,* and *Connection to Agency Outcomes.* The discussion further ties together solution-focused literature with the findings of how agency and strengths were co-constructed. It is hoped that this practice-based research will provide a useful addition to the research on how agency is co-constructed and experienced through solution-focused counselling sessions that have a focus on strengths with adolescents.

Acknowledgements

I have viewed this research journey as climbing a mountain. At the beginning, standing at the bottom and looking up at what is to come, but knowing that it will be an adventure. The mountain looks very tall and difficult to climb, but as you get underway, you have enthusiasm and excitement as you see yourself making steady progress. However, you also become increasingly more aware of how much further you still have to go! It is daunting and feels impossible sometimes as your muscles weaken, or the weather packs in and you start to lose your energy for the task ahead. Although with each step, you remember that you are still making progress and enjoy that although it is hard, you are learning and growing in the process. Then, as the top of the mountain becomes visible and you ascend to the summit, you reflect on how far you have come and what a mammoth job that was! As you take in the view around you, you appreciate what you have managed to do, and all the beautiful things that helped you to get there. You see the challenges you went through with new eyes, and realise that despite it all, you are here, and you have made it! That has been my journey, and people have been the beautiful encouragers and supporters who have contributed to me reaching the summit.

Ben, you are the number one. You are the best husband with the most interested listening ear and safest of hugs. You have listened to every thought I have had about this research due to my verbal processing and somehow managed to understand every word and respond in the most helpful ways. You are so supportive, both practically and emotionally, and I appreciate everything that you have done to help us both get here. Now onto new things together! Yay!

Thank you also to my friends. You have made space in our conversations for me to speak about my research and all that comes with it. Through this, you have been so encouraging

and supported me through your prayers and kind words which has meant so much that you have embraced this journey with me. To my family, you are my advocates and always back me and what I am doing. I feel that you always view me as being able to do anything I put my mind to. You listen to me and all of my wonderings and help to challenge and sharpen me. My skills to be able to do this have come from all of the years of support you have provided to my development as an independent and altruistic thinker.

To my supervisors Shanee and Kerry. We make a good team! Thank you for your commitment to this project and how you have walked alongside me every step of the way. Your enthusiasm for the project and expert eyes, have helped me to see my work in new ways so that I can refine it. The suggestions that you have provided me, along with your understanding of me and my research, have planted seeds that have helped me make this project come together in a way that feels really fitting. This would not have been possible without your guidance and support.

Finally, thank you to the participants who took part in this research. You are the stars of the show and I am so proud of all that you have managed to do in your lives. Thank you for letting us share with you in that. I hope that this research champions you, your strengths and your agency.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background and Context for the Research

During my time as a secondary school teacher and school guidance counsellor, I have often asked what it is that students and clients want from counselling. A common response to this question is for the counsellor to *"give good advice"*. These conversations sparked an interest in me because since beginning my counselling studies, I have become aware of how giving advice is something that is more of a societal construct of counselling than it is an accurate reflection of what actually happens in counselling. An assumption that I had about counselling was that for it to be effective, it should meet clients' expectations. However, with advice giving sitting outside the typical role of the counsellor, it made me wonder how counsellors can instead encourage clients to develop a sense of agency which empowers them to make their own decisions about the change they want to see happen in their lives. Through working with clients using the solution-focused approach to counselling, I hope that this process can enhance a client's belief in themselves and their own strengths, skills and resources to make change happen.

When establishing a therapeutic alliance with a client, I have wondered how this could sometimes encourage the client to build up an attachment of dependency on the counsellor for support. This is a consideration for me, especially if the counsellor is seen as the expert who gives advice to help solve the client's problems, rather than facilitating the process for the client to develop independence to work towards their own solutions. Adolescence is a critical time of development, however, it also provides a vital opportunity for developing personal agency which can lead to positive outcomes such as greater resourcefulness and

resilience (Morton & Montgomery, 2013). Through the solution-focused counselling approach, clients are encouraged to become aware of and describe their own resources, skills and strengths. These are then drawn on for the client to see how they can be used to work towards their goals and bring about the change they want to see happen in their lives. This requires the counsellor to listen carefully and actively for the client's strengths, resources, and skills, and for any past or present utilisation of those skills (Hanton, 2011). This approach can further support the therapeutic alliance in a way that encourages client agency (Hanton, 2011).

Through learning about the solution-focused approach to counselling and putting this into practice in my own counselling work, I have found it to be an effective approach which encourages strengths, resources and skills to be highlighted and drawn on in the process of working towards the client's goals. This challenges the expectation of the counsellor to provide the client with advice because a key assumption which underpins the solution-focused approach is that the counsellor is not the expert on the client and their context, the client is (Hanton, 2011). When put into practice, this means that the counselling process is collaborative and ways forward are co-constructed. This is because when a solution-focused counsellor asks questions, they do so as a naïve enquirer from a not-knowing stance which enables them to be client-focused (Hanton, 2011). Through being client-focused, not counsellor-led, this conveys belief in the client and their strengths to manage and cope.

New Zealand Secondary School Counselling Context

The context for this research was in a counselling department in a New Zealand secondary school setting with adolescent participants. This enabled me to explore the co-construction of agency and strengths through solution-focused counselling with adolescents. This section will describe the context of counselling in a New Zealand secondary school setting.

Guidance counsellors first started working in New Zealand secondary schools in the 1960s (Crowe, 2014) as a response to help deal with a large number of emerging social issues that students were perceived to have in relation to educational, vocational and personal matters (Besley, 2002). Guidance counsellors were seen as specialist middle managers in schools, who provided guidance, leadership and management of guidance programmes (Crowe, 2014). Their role involved providing counselling services to students, their families and staff, while also networking with outside agencies to provide appropriate referrals (Crowe, 2014). This supported the nature of the role being a preventative measure, as well as developmental and remedial (Crowe, 2014). Across secondary schools in New Zealand, there is an increasing demand on guidance counsellors as a growing number of students are seeking support for issues that are becoming significantly more complex (Crowe, 2014). These are often related to problems that have come from household poverty, poor mental health, family dysfunction, bullying, relationships, drugs and alcohol (Education Review Office, 2013). Findings gained from an evaluation from the Education Review Office (ERO) about guidance counselling in New Zealand found that 29% of secondary schools are capable of providing highly effective guidance and counselling support (Education Review Office, 2013). However, there are considerable challenges present for guidance counsellors in secondary schools as student needs are becoming more diversified and the demand for counselling intensifies (Hermansson & Webb, 1993). Student well-being has been recognised by ERO as being strongly linked to learning and engagement (Education Review Office, 2013). Therefore, guidance counsellors are seen as vital for their valuable contribution to student well-being and learning (Crowe, 2014). ERO (2013) found that the effectiveness of the guidance counselling role is enhanced by schools having a strong ethos of care and a shared understanding about the guidance and counselling approach that is used. The school that I worked in during this research project followed these recommendations from ERO (2013) for effective guidance counselling. They valued the role of the guidance counsellors highly, had a strong ethos of care for students and clear

processes for how counselling is approached, which was a shared understanding amongst the members of the school community.

Research Aims

This research aims to make a valuable contribution to the literature by exploring how agency is co-constructed between the counsellor and client using a solution-focused approach, with a particular focus on strengths. This adds to the research a within session process of how agency and strengths are co-constructed with adolescents through solution-focused counselling. The research is practice-based and was therefore conducted in a New Zealand high school setting with adolescent clients. The data were gathered from working with three clients for three sessions each. However, two re-storied case studies have been presented, with data from two clients being merged into one case. The data that have been analysed include conversations between the counsellor and clients over the course of their counselling sessions, their experiences of co-constructing agency and strengths, and what has been helpful for them. This adds adolescent in-session voice to a body of research on agency that is largely focused on adults, or on retrospective accounts of counselling. These cases have been developed using narrative analysis and by re-storying the client's narratives of how agency and strengths were co-constructed through solution-focused counselling. Through this research, I hope to contribute to the research literature that relates to enhancing adolescent client agency through solution-focused counselling, with a focus on strengths. This was done through researching the co-construction of agency through solution-focused counselling with adolescents that draws on their strengths, resources and skills in a New Zealand context.

Research Question

- How are agency and strengths co-constructed through the solution-focused counselling process with adolescents?

Supporting Questions

- How is the co-construction of agency and strengths experienced by adolescents through solution-focused counselling?
- How is the co-construction of agency and strengths experienced by the counsellor through solution-focused counselling?
- What difference does the co-construction of agency and strengths make for adolescent clients and their lives?

The research questions focus on the co-construction of agency and strengths through solution-focused counselling. This is presented in the research as a re-storying of the solution-focused counselling process between the adolescent clients and the counsellor, and how this contributed to the co-construction of strengths and agency. The research has been structured to included transcriptions of both the counsellor and client's voice, and researcher reflections alongside this throughout, to weave together the subjective meanings of agency and strengths from the counsellor and client perspectives. The re-storied narratives about how the clients responded to and experienced solution-focused counselling have been guided by the research questions. The chapters of the client's stories in the findings provide insights into these research questions. This is because the re-storied chapters aim to provide new narratives that tell the client's story about how agency and strengths were co-constructed and experienced, and what difference this made for them in their lives.

Organisation of Thesis

This thesis is organised into eight chapters. Chapter One provides an introduction to the background, rationale and aims for the research. 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 qualitative research, practice-based research and narrative case study. Chapter Four describes the methods used in conducting the research, including ethical considerations, data collection, data analysis, rigour and trustworthiness of the study, and outlines how the findings are presented. Chapter Five introduces the findings chapters and outlines in further detail how these have been constructed and presented. Chapter Six presents Chloe's story as a narrative case study. Chapter Seven present's Millie's story as a narrative case study. Chapter Eight begins by summarising the findings in the discussion as an epilogue of the stories, alongside the literature. This is followed by counsellor learnings and implications for practice, strengths and limitations of the research, and then possible directions for future research are offered before the conclusion. The thesis is organised in line with the narrative inquiry approach, with the Literature Review chapter being presented as a 'prologue' to introduce the story, and the Discussion chapter being presented as an 'epilogue' to conclude the story. This was done to fit the notion of research as re-storying through the narrative inquiry approach. This was also tied into the Findings chapters by the inclusion of a character introduction for each client, and a synopsis of the counselling process prior to the chapters of the client's story being presented in each case.

CHAPTER TWO

Prologue: Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, I begin by discussing the literature around social constructionism and how this relates to solution-focused counselling, which is the counselling approach I have used in this research. I have then outlined some of the literature on agency, to provide an understanding of how it is developed and what it can contribute to people and their lives. Relevant literature on agency in counselling has then been explored to help direct and build the aims and rationale for this research more specifically. The solution-focused counselling approach is then outlined in terms of its development and some of the main assumptions underpinning it. Similarities and differences of some of the different approaches that work with strengths such as positive psychology, the strengths-based approach and solution-focused counselling have been discussed. This is to provide further clarity on how this research will differ to these other approaches, through being guided by a solution-focused way of working with client strengths. To build on this, the skills and solution-focused ways of working are then described more specifically in regard to enhancing agency and strengths, to provide an understanding of how the research was carried out. Literature on adolescence, agency and solution-focused counselling is then discussed to explore the appropriateness of this research, and what it can offer adolescents. To conclude, the literature is summarised and my research directions and rationale are provided, which is to explore the co-construction of agency and strengths with adolescent clients through solution-focused counselling.

Social Constructionism and Solution-Focused Counselling

In this section, social constructionism and solution-focused counselling will be outlined to provide an understanding of how the research will be carried out, with the social constructionism philosophy underpinning the solution-focused counselling approach.

Solution-focused therapy sits within the postmodern and social constructionist paradigms and family of therapies (Jones-Smith, 2016). There is no single definition for social constructionism. However, there are a number of characteristics and assumptions that provide a foundation. Through social constructionism, ideas, concepts and memories are regarded as being shaped from social interactions and are mediated through language (Hoffman, 1992). This involves a process of co-construction, which refers to the way people construct knowledge and meaning through their social interactions with others, and in the space between people (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Burr, 1995; Creswell, 2014; De Jong & Berg, 2013).

Extending beyond a way to express oneself, language is viewed as the way in which the world gets constructed and is regarded as a *"carrier of power"* (Allen, 2005, p. 50). Therefore, as the counsellor and client work together, the use of dialogue and language is viewed as being essential for the creation of meaning and knowledge relating to the client's story (Brott, 2001; De Jong & Berg, 2013). This view of humans generating meaning through conversation challenges modernism and places the solution-focused counsellor in a more collaborative role, instead of being seen as the person who holds the knowledge (Tarragona, 2008). The role of the client therefore becomes more active, as opposed to waiting passively to be filled by the knowledge and direction of the counsellor. Through the conversation between the counsellor and the client, a new story, reality or solution emerges (Tarragona, 2008). The solution-focused approach views problems as existing outside of people (Hanton, 2011). This aligns with the social constructionist view of problems being actions

that impinge on our sense of agency, and exist in language, rather than existing within a person (Tarragona, 2008).

Solution-focused counselling therefore becomes a space where a new narrative can be formed and offers the client the opportunity to develop new agency beyond the problem (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Hanton, 2011; Tarragona, 2008). By seeking a solution that is *instead* of the problem, clients are encouraged to view themselves in ways where their identity is shaped by what they want to become, rather than being inextricably linked with 'the problem' and what they were (Hanton, 2011). This is argued by McCanny (2009) to help people recognise that they are more than the sum of their problems and supports them to feel valued and talk about what they want to change more readily.

The solution-focused approach to counselling embodies social constructionism, as it is the philosophy that underpins it. This is because it is a conversational therapy that involves the client and counsellor, through language, constructing new client realities. Languaging by clients and the counsellor is therefore seen as a type of action, which is central to therapeutic change (Burr, 1995). The word languaging is often used as a verb to describe the process of how the words that are used constitute and create the subjective realities made by each individual, within the social context of their culture, family, religion and personal experiences. This means that the way that people describe and re-describe their experiences through language has the power to transform what their experiences are (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994). In the context of solution-focused counselling and for the purposes of this research, the word languaging is used throughout as a verb to describe the process of how language facilitated the construction of meaning and contributed to the process of change.

Through solution-focused counselling, past successes are amplified which helps to uncover client's resources, strengths and skills (Hanton, 2011). Through deconstructing their past

experiences with this approach, this helps clients to view themselves as competent, with abilities that they have used before and can use again, to make their desired changes happen in their lives. This offers fresh realisations and new possibilities to be constructed, which helps to shape new meanings for how their future can unfold, and how clients view themselves within it (De Jong & Berg, 2013).

Within social constructionism, identity and the view of 'self' is not seen as fixed, and is instead viewed as always changing (Hoffman, 1992). Layder (2007) argues that this view of self from social constructionism needs to acknowledge that humans have individual agency over their intentionality and characteristics, beyond being an effect of language and discourse. This invites a view of self that is shaped through how individuals assert their agency with how they construct their identity. Jones-Smith (2016) supports this view and proposes from a solution-focused stance that *"we are always in the process of constructing ourselves"* (p. 489). This offers the construction of self as being future and action focused. This differs from the Rogerian, humanist and essentialist views in therapy which are more focused on finding oneself (Winston, 2015). The solution-focused position, underpinned by social constructionism, offers clients the ability to have agency over how they construct and describe themselves, and make change happen in their lives.

Agency in Counselling

This section describes agency, how it is developed and what it can contribute to people and their lives. Literature on agency in counselling is then explored to identify significant findings, and potential gaps in research to help to build and direct the aims and rationale for this research.

Agency is defined by Zimmerman and Cleary (2006) as "*one's capability to originate and direct actions for given purposes. It is influenced by the belief in one's effectiveness in performing specific tasks, which is termed self-efficacy, as well as by one's actual skill*" (p. 45). This highlights the role of self-belief in personal agency, and how this connects to the effectiveness of carrying out specific tasks. This is supported by Bandura (2006) who suggests that people are not just products and onlookers of their life. Instead, they are active contributors. Agency involves self-directedness to execute actions which is multifaceted and operates through self-regulatory processes to link thought to action. This is because as people make choices and action plans, they also need to construct appropriate courses of action which requires motivation and self-regulation for effective execution (Bandura, 2006). To enhance motivation in order to execute future goals, Bandura (1982) suggests that it is important to have sub-goals that provide immediate incentives and guides for action. This helps people to develop belief in themselves and their efficacy as they see this in action with smaller goals, as they work towards the larger ones.

To add further depth to the concept of agency and how it is developed, Bandura (2006) proposes that there are four core properties of human agency. These include intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness. Intentionality includes action plans and strategies for realising chosen intentions. As most actions involve other people, this highlights the interconnectedness of people both individually and collectively when implementing action plans to realise goals (Bandura 2006). Secondly, forethought is argued to be an extension of agency that includes more than future-directed plans. Through cognitive representations, futures are visualised which brings them into the present and provides a guide for behaviour and a source of motivation (Bandura, 2006). Having forethought is argued by Bandura (2006) to promote purposeful action and direction in regard to values, purpose and meaning for a person's life. Thirdly, to be agentic, self-reactiveness is important. Therefore, people need to adopt an intention, construct an action plan, and then execute it through motivating and regulating themselves effectively. This

helps to link thought to action (Bandura, 2006). Finally, agency involves self-reflectiveness, which is said to be a core component of human agency (Bandura, 1986). This is because Bandura (2006) argues that people are also self-examiners of their own functioning which helps them to understand their personal efficacy, the soundness of their thoughts and actions, the meaning of their pursuits and to make any necessary adjustments.

Human functioning is socially situated, so therefore psychological concepts such as agency are socially embedded (Bandura, 2006). Gibson and Cartwright (2013) argue that from a social constructionist perspective, society plays a significant role in agency by constraining or enabling it. In addition to this, agency has the potential to bring real significance to people's lives through how it is experienced, described, reimagined and enacted by individuals. The belief that people have about themselves and their efficacy is a key resource in personal development and change (Bandura, 2006). Bandura (1994, 2008, as cited in Brummert Lennings & Bussey, 2017) makes the connection between self-efficacy and agency, arguing that a driving force of a person's agency is their self-efficacy beliefs in their ability to execute a particular action or activity. Furthermore, Bandura (1990, as cited in Brummert Lennings & Bussey, 2017) proposes that self-efficacy is the most central mechanism of agency that can impact human behaviour. This is because it can impact how people think about themselves. For example, in ways that are optimistic or pessimistic which is either self-enhancing or self-debilitating. This is said to impact people's goals, aspirations, motivation, perseverance and how they cope in adversity (Bandura, 2006). Due to the interconnectedness of intrapersonal, behavioural and environmental determinants, self-belief can be largely influenced by many factors (Bandura, 2006). Since people are not autonomous agents, this highlights the influence that other people and society can have on self-belief, and therefore agency (Bandura, 1986).

Studies on agency have largely tended to focus on the benefits of agency. These studies sought to recognise the contribution that clients made in counselling where the dominant

medicalised representations of psychotherapy were present (Wampold, Ahn & Coleman, 2001). This is supported by Bohart and Tallman (2010) who called the client the *"neglected common factor"* in psychotherapy (p. 83). They recognised that the position and point of view of the therapist had long been privileged in research, practice and professional discourse. Furthermore, experimental studies of client factors were rare, and favoured a correlational, qualitative and retrospective design (Bohart & Tallman, 2010). To address this, Bohart and Tallman (2010) argue that there is a strong case for research that explores the power of the client as an active contributor to the counselling process. This is because a strong predictor of therapeutic outcomes relates to the quality of the client's participation in counselling (Bohart & Tallman, 2010). This finding was supported by Rennie (2000), who found that clients who perceived themselves as agentic, valued their own contributions in the counselling process, and attributed their results to their efforts. Rennie (2000) conducted a study on client experiences of counselling through a retrospective report measure. This process aimed to stimulate clients to recall their moment-by-moment experiences of an hour-long counselling session to explore their control of the process. Findings from this study suggest that clients are highly active in counselling, and through using their agency, can steer sessions in directions they perceive are helpful.

Gibson and Cartwright (2013) also carried out a retrospective study of adolescent client experiences of counselling, but this focused on how they were able to be agents in the counselling process, as opposed to in their wider lives as a result of counselling. This study found that adolescents were able to assert their agency in counselling settings through choosing to see a counsellor, in how they evaluated their counsellor, how they responded to different aspects of counselling, and by portraying themselves as being primarily responsible for the benefits they experienced as a result of counselling (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). This indicated that adolescents can shape their construction of counselling to better match their own priorities, by exercising their agency (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013).

To tie together the counsellor and client experiences, von der Lippe, Oddli and Halvorsen (2019) argue that gaining more detailed understandings of counsellor behaviour also appears to be a necessary research focus in order to get a stronger grasp on different client outcomes as a result of counselling. This is important in researching client agency because it is recognised as being essential for both the engagement of the client in the process of counselling, as well as their outcomes from it. However, as Bruner (1990) and Giddens (1984) suggest, agency can also be socially constrained, which can occur in counselling as a result of the co-constructed experiences, and power imbalances present. Therefore having an insight into counsellor behaviour can support the findings on how agency is enhanced through the counselling process with clients.

Sparks, Duncan and Miller (2007) argue that research which addresses agency of the client has largely focused on adults and there is limited attention given to the experiences of adolescents in the counselling process, and their agency. This led me to consider how agency is co-constructed with adolescents through solution-focused counselling, with a focus on strengths, to bring together the client and counsellor experiences. I then wanted to focus on exploring how I was responding to clients to consider what works for them, and what could be done differently to support their agency. This values the client's voice and invites their agency over the counselling process.

Solution-Focused Counselling

This section outlines the solution-focused counselling approach, its development and the assumptions that underpin and guide the ways of working with clients.

Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) is a strengths-based approach which was first developed by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and their colleagues in the 1980s at the

Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee (de Shazer, 1985; de Shazer et al., 1986). In the early development of this approach, de Shazer and Berg were influenced by the work of Milton Erickson who believed in the uniqueness of each individual, their skills and ways of coping (Hanton, 2011). This is a fundamental base of the solution-focused approach and influences the way that practitioners view their clients. Additionally, it is also based on finding out what works, or what is currently working for a client and doing more of it (De Jong & Berg, 2013).

These key beliefs represent a paradigm shift from most of the traditional and modern approaches to therapy which concentrate on the problem (de Shazer et al., 2007). These approaches are based on understanding, analysing, interpreting and getting to the 'root' of the problem, then managing, and moving away from it (Hanton, 2011). The post-modern approach of solution-focused therapy alternatively focuses on what is, what has been and what will be happening differently instead of the problem. Furthermore, this view highlights a social-constructionist approach where knowledge and meaning are believed to be constructed by the individual, influenced by their context and subjective realities (Lichtman, 2013). These contextual influences may include culture, family, religion and life experiences (Jones-Smith, 2016).

When working from a solution-focused approach, it is not necessary to understand the pathology of the problem in order to collaborate in search of solutions (O'Connell, 2012). The developers of solution-focused therapy were clear that this was an evolving approach and as a result, this takes it away from being formulaic, and instead shifts it towards being client-centred and directed, rather than counsellor-led (Hanton, 2011). This invites the client's agency in the counselling process.

Connections Between Positive Psychology, Strengths-Based and Solution-Focused Approaches

In this research, I was particularly interested in researching agency through working with client strengths through solution-focused counselling. There are many similarities between the solution-focused approach and strengths-based approaches. The strengths-based approach will therefore be outlined to describe its evolution through influences such as positive psychology, and to clarify some of the similarities and differences to the solution-focused approach. This will help to clarify the direction of this research as situating itself predominantly within the solution-focused approach, with a focus on client strengths, as opposed to working from the strengths-based approach.

The fields of psychology and social work over the past few decades have been moving towards a strengths perspective in both the underpinning philosophy and in clinical practice (Saleebey, 1992; Petersen & Seligman, 2004). In 1998, Martin Seligman, after being elected president of the American Psychological Association, pieced together the individual efforts of researchers and academics who emphasized the importance of working on people's strengths and virtues to explore the potential that resides within them (Bozkurt, 2014). He proposed to psychologists that the field of psychology had become focused on the dark side of human existence. He stated that, *"psychology is not just the study of weakness and damage; it is also the study of strengths and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best within ourselves"* (Seligman, 1999, as cited in Jones-Smith, 2016, p. 555).

Seligman put forward the concept of 'well-being' which involves a person transferring their strengths and experiences like optimism, hope, satisfaction and happiness to various parts of their life to transform their environment, in order to flourish (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009).

This has a focus on what is going well, while also developing and exploring strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses and what is going wrong (Bozkurt, 2014). This aligns with the solution-focused approach of focusing on what works and what is working (De Jong & Berg, 2013).

Jones-Smith (2016) proposes that the development of the strengths-based approach in counselling has been influenced by movements such as positive psychology and solution-focused therapy as well as the writings of Dennis Saleebey in the field of social work. Based on the work of Petersen and Seligman (2004), positive psychology focuses on the pursuit of happiness and flourishing and puts character strengths at the centre of its formulations. The strengths-based approach differs to positive psychology as it provides a broader conceptualisation of strengths beyond the predominant focus of character strengths (Jones-Smith, 2016). The strengths-based approach extends beyond the focus of positive psychology by presenting a model of how strengths are developed within a person, and by describing how strengths are involved in the process of developing healthy behaviours and managing maladaptive ones (Jones-Smith, 2016).

In his writings, Saleebey (1992) also gave attention to this way of working with clients. He challenged social workers to focus on learning how their clients have survived, despite facing difficulties and challenges in their lives (Saleebey, 1992). This connects with the technique of asking coping questions involved in the solution-focused approach. These questions serve to uncover the small and undeniable successes that a client experiences in their day-to-day and moment-by-moment coping (De Jong & Berg, 2013). This attempts to highlight a focus on what clients are doing and the strengths, skills and resources they have utilised to survive their pain and circumstances (De Jong & Berg, 2013).

The solution-focused approach is focused predominantly on solutions to problems, rather than on the problems themselves. This shifts the focus to the present and future, as

opposed to the past, and looks for times when the problem didn't exist to create new meanings through collaborative dialogue (Jones-Smith, 2016). Conversely, in the strengths-based approach, strengths are used as a means to deal with presenting problems. The strengths-based approach differs to the solution-focused approach by focusing on problems more explicitly. However, the focus shifts from problems towards strengths, as opposed to solutions. Hanton (2011) argues that most solution-focused therapists would accept that it is a strengths-based model. However, he cautions that if the counsellor is looking for strengths explicitly, this can detract from the client-led agenda and as a result, the counsellor may miss something. Instead, Hanton (2011) suggests that the solution-focused therapist uses strengths (eg. through strengths cards) in a client-led way to highlight the resources, skills and strengths that a client has. In addition to this, Hanton (2011) suggests that the counsellor listens with the ear of a detective throughout the session, and when they hear strengths, they note them. These can then be applied to dealing with the presenting problem, as it is in the strengths-based approach. However, it goes further to explore the clients hopes for the future when the problem is not there or is reduced.

The therapist is seen as a co-equal in both the strengths-based and solution-focused approaches. However, in the strengths-based approach the therapist helps the client to reconnect with their strengths to address the problems that brought them to counselling. The solution-focused therapist on the other hand, helps clients find solutions to their problems instead. This differs slightly because the strengths-based therapist examines the client's strengths and helps the client to understand and build on them, as well as learn how they can use them to manage their weaknesses (Jones-Smith, 2016). The therapist gives homework tasks and experiential activities to help this process (Jones-Smith, 2016). This appears to be more therapist-led than the solution-focused approach which is client-led and as a result, all work done in counselling connects with the client's frame of reference and goals, with them being seen as the expert on their life (De Jong & Miller, 1995). The strengths-based approach appears to see the therapist as more of an expert, as the key

concepts which guide it are more therapist driven, such as how strengths are developed and how they are enhanced through the various relationships that people form (Jones-Smith, 2016).

A key component which connects the strengths-based and solution-focused approaches are the ways that strengths are enhanced through a relational focus. Jones-Smith (2016) argues that strengths are relational, and they are nurtured in relationships with others. Relationship questions in the solution-focused approach help clients to highlight what others would notice when things are different, which provides another perspective to view the situation from, which could uncover strengths that others can see in the client (De Jong & Berg, 2013). De Jong and Berg (2013) argue that this form of questioning is beneficial for adolescents as they can reflect on themselves and their strengths from a more removed distance which can enable the client to feel more comfortable about responding.

Enhancing Agency and Strengths Through Solution-Focused Counselling

This section brings together the focus of this research by describing how agency and strengths are enhanced through the solution-focused counselling approach. This helps to position the direction of the research within the solution-focused ways of working with client strengths and agency, as opposed to positive psychology and the strengths-based approach as described above. This aims to offer further clarity on how the research was carried out.

Agency refers to the feeling of an individual being able to control their own actions, as well as the experience of external events by controlling their own actions and responses (Minohara et al., 2016). Solution-focused counselling is an approach that empowers clients and enables them to gain confidence in themselves through experiencing an enhanced sense of personal agency (De Jong & Berg, 2013). This is supported by solution-focused

counsellors drawing out client successes which builds their sense of agency to make the changes they want to see in their lives (De Jong & Berg, 2013).

In solution-focused counselling, to establish an empowering therapeutic alliance, it is important to view the client positively and hold the belief that clients have strengths, resources, supports and skills that they can utilize (De Jong & Berg, 2013; Young, 2005). De Jong and Miller (1995) argue that the discerning characteristic of the solution-focused approach is about believing your clients, as well as believing in your clients (De Jong & Miller, 1995). When counselling from this approach, with a focus on a client's strengths, it empowers the client within their own context to encourage them to have the self-belief to move towards the changes they want to make, which supports their agency (Welfare, Farmer, & Lile, 2013).

When counselling from a solution-focused approach, the assumptions and beliefs which underpin it guide the counsellor to be focused on the client's strengths and how these can be applied to the change process (Corcoran, 2005). The client is the expert, not the counsellor, and the client has skills, strengths and resources which they will have used before, and can use again. This places the focus on mental health and what is working, rather than what is 'wrong' and not working, which shifts away from the traditional problem focused approaches that are based more on treatment or intervention (Berg & Miller, 1992). This focus on strengths also influences perspective and perception changing in the process (Corcoran, 2005). Peterson and Park (2009) argue that everyone has strengths that need to be recognised, celebrated, strengthened and used. Working with client strengths through solution-focused counselling is not about problem solving, but instead, is about possibility making. Problems may of course be solved along the way, but that is not the focus. It is not about the counsellor making good, solid, decisions for clients. Instead, it is about the counsellor creating the opportunities for clients to have the agency to do that for themselves, individually and collectively (Saleebey, 2008). This aligns with the hope that building on

strengths through counselling can enhance agency, which has been explored in this research.

In the solution-focused approach, Hanton (2011) argues that the skills listed below are not to be confused as being techniques or interventions. It is in the 'how to do the skill' that is the key, not the intervention itself. Solution-focused skills that the counsellor may hone to elicit and amplify client strengths and agency could include the following (Hanton, 2011):

- The ability to engage in problem-free talk
- The ability to elicit from the client a preferred future and co-construct a rich image or narrative of that future
- The ability to actively listen for clients' strengths, resources, skills and any past or present utilisation of those skills
- The ability to look for exceptions, or instances of success and differences
- The ability to take a non-expert stance towards the client's experiences and constructs

De Jong and Miller (1995), De Jong and Berg (2013) and Hanton (2011) describe, explain, and illustrate several solution-focused questions that a worker can use to uncover client strengths and support their agency. These include:

- The miracle question. This is a question which invites the client's attention away from their current difficulties and focuses it on imagining a time when the problem is solved and as a result, they have moved, or are moving towards their preferred future (De Jong & Miller, 1995; Hanton, 2011).
- Exception-finding questions (or instances of success). These questions are used to discover a client's present and past successes in relation to their goals. (De Jong & Miller, 1995). They also aim to uncover times when the problem is not there or is not

as dominant in the client's life. This is in contrast to searching for the 'root' of the problem (Hanton, 2011).

- Scaling questions. These conversations occur using a scale from 1-10 for a variety of different reasons in solution-focused counselling, which offers versatility. They help clients express complex and intuitive observations about their past experiences, future possibilities, and strategies that have been helpful for them to move up the scale (De Jong & Berg, 2013).

- Coping questions. These questions can be helpful for uncovering client strengths by asking how the client is able to cope amongst the difficulties they are experiencing (De Jong & Miller, 1995).

- *"What's better?"* questions. These bring to light exceptions that have occurred and recognise that the client's life and goals are in process, so therefore are not static. These questions increase the chances of uncovering exceptions and strengths that are the most meaningful and useful in the present moment to the client (De Jong & Miller, 1995).

However, De Jong and Miller (1995) caution that in using these solution-focused questions, there must be a commitment to work within the client's frame of reference so that the work done together is related to the client's goals. This helps support client agency through being client-led.

The solution-focused approach focuses on what is working for a client through exploring exceptions to problems, or instances of success as they are often called to better reflect a solution-focused mindset (Shennan, 2014). This supports the client to becomes more aware of their current and past successes in relation to their goals, and what strengths they have used to make this instance of success happen (De Jong & Miller, 1995). This affirms clients' agency, strengths and ability to make change, while also encourages hope for both the client and counsellor (De Jong & Berg, 2013).

Through collaborative and co-constructed conversations between the solution-focused counsellor and client, this enables adolescents to make connections between past successes and possible future actions. O'Connell (2012) argues that as clients remember past successes, their sense of personal agency increases. Thinking about what works strengthens the client's ability to do more of this which encourages improved self-regulation and reduced impulsivity in progressing towards their goals (Steinberg, 2007; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006).

The solution-focused approach involves practitioners using a language of expectancy which helps to build vision and hope for the client to see that they have strengths, skills and resources that they can use to make positive change occur for themselves (Corcoran, 2005). Bandura states that, *"unless people believe that they can produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act"* (Bandura, 2000, p. 75). Enhancing agency through an awareness of strengths can come from noticing what is working already or noticing the times when positive change has already occurred for them, which may increase the incentive to act as Bandura (2000) suggests. The solution-focused assumption that change is always happening and that situations are not static encourages clients to notice that they already have the skills or strengths that they can utilise to bring about change (Hanton, 2011). This amplifies clients' strengths, abilities and successes and builds their sense of agency.

In counselling, direct and indirect compliments highlight adolescent's strengths and resources, which empowers them towards change (Corcoran, 1998). However, it is thought that compliments have a more significant influence when the client comes up with them for themselves (De Jong & Berg, 2013). This encourages an increased sense of agency as the client is able to recognise their own resources and strengths themselves. A question I have used in my work with clients through this research is, *"How did you manage to do that*?" in

order to encourage the client to highlight their own strengths for an enhanced sense of agency as opposed to directly complimenting clients on their success from the counsellor's perspective. This is an example of a coping question as guided by De Jong and Berg (2013).

Adolescence, Agency and Solution-Focused Counselling

In this section, I discuss adolescence and how this developmental stage is an appropriate fit for enhancing agency. This is then discussed in regard to how agency can be enhanced through solution-focused counselling with adolescents, and what this can offer, based on relevant literature.

Adolescence is a stage in life which offers a dynamic developmental opportunity to foster strengths to encourage the likelihood of positive outcomes. In developmental psychology, adolescence is seen as a time where autonomy is paramount and strong ideas about freedom, choice and individual accountability are present (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). As a result, this can influence the way that adolescents view themselves (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). Counselling approaches that emphasise a client-led process are argued to be the most appropriate fit for supporting adolescents and developing their agency (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). Furthermore, approaches that encourage adolescents to be involved in decision-making processes which draw on their strengths may have far-reaching impacts on their ability to overcome adversity and make positive transitions into adulthood (Morton & Montgomery, 2013). These strategies have the potential to increase a wide range of protective factors among adolescents with their attitudes, skills and relationships in order to enhance well-being and agency (Morton & Montgomery, 2013).

Solution-focused counselling is client-led and requires the client to be part of decision-making processes through using their own skills, resources and strengths which connects

with the proposition from Morton & Montgomery (2013) that this can enhance an adolescent's ability to overcome adversity. Furthermore, the social constructionist viewpoint which underpins the solution-focused approach encourages adolescents to gain a sense of control through being seen as the expert on their lives and collaborating in a co-constructed process to explore new meanings and solutions (Berg & De Jong, 1996). However, Evans (2007) cautions that there are power imbalances present for adolescents, for example, between the counsellor and the client, or between school staff and the student, which may actually be disempowering. Gibson and Cartwright (2013) therefore argue that is a challenging task for adolescents to claim agency in this complex and contradictory social context, especially if they are experiencing psychological distress.

A qualitative study conducted by Binder et al. (2011) found that it is particularly important for adolescents to work with a counsellor who supports client independence, agency and autonomy to mitigate these challenges. Solution-focused counselling can further support this need, as it works to enhance client agency through seeing the client as the expert and minimises feelings associated with lack of control and self-blame by emphasising strengths and helping adolescents see that problems exist outside of themselves (Corcoran, 1998).

The solution-focused approach can be a very useful tool with adolescents because of its future focus, emphasis on increasing awareness of strengths, and conveying belief in the clients and their resources to cope (Hopson & Kim, 2004). Through the solution-focused approach to counselling, Bateman and Milner (2011) argue that adolescents are empowered with a sense of agency as they learn that they have strengths and abilities to make change happen. Lethem (2002) proposes that a solution-focused approach works well with adolescents because it is an accepting and client-centred approach which encourages problem-free talk. This supports adolescents to see that there are many areas in their lives that are working well which is beneficial for instilling a sense of hope for both adolescent clients and counsellors.

In a study by Hay (2005), which explored the effectiveness of a programme that aims to empower children with strategies and insights to enhance their self-concept, it was found that adolescents have a relatively well-structured perception of themselves. This was found to be in domains such as intelligence, sociability and sports. However, for adolescents, new information which is not consistent with an individual's self-concept is more likely to be disregarded and challenged. As a result, the findings of the study suggest that teachers and guidance counsellors need to establish a non-threatening framework that allows them to discuss a range of topics in a cooperative manner (Hay, 2005). Furthermore, Hay (2005) argues that in these interactions, the focus needs to be on empowering students with strategies and insights to enhance their self-concept as being capable, with strengths, for their overall well-being. This came from using activities that incorporated planning, verbalisation and reflective thinking. This helped students to place their performances in context, for a more realistic perspective to reference and measure from (Hay, 2005).

This highlights that a client-centred and directed approach such as solution-focused therapy is an appropriate fit for adolescents in regard to how they construct their view of themselves. This allows clients to recognise their own strengths through a process of self-reflection, which is a core component of agency (Bandura, 2006). This notion is emphasised by the study, recognising that as children develop, they shift from a concrete way of viewing themselves and towards a more abstract view (Hay, 2005). This develops as a result of observations and feedback from their own performance and feedback from others (Hay, 2005). Supporting students to solve problems using their own skills, strategies and reflective thinking was found to have a positive effect on the formulation of their self-concept, through seeing their capabilities in action (Hay, 2005).

In my research, this comes from a solution-focused approach which works to build solutions, rather than solve problems. This was to support the client to feel empowered by being

actively engaged in process of solution-building, to thereby increase their autonomy and personal agency. This aligns with findings from a study by Cleary and Zimmerman (2004) which was based on an intervention programme in schools to enhance students' self-regulation and empowerment. This study found that problem-solving models in schools are typically driven by adults which puts students in a passive role where they wait for adults to decide which intervention will be the most effective (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). In order for adolescents to be empowered to make change happen in their lives, Cleary and Zimmerman (2004) argue that they need to be actively involved in the process. This aligns with the findings from Rennie (2000) and the solution-focused approach, which my research has been carried out using as it views the client as the expert on their own life and the counselling process is led by them. By empowering students to be the driving force in the problem-solving process, this encourages their autonomy and personal agency (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). Instead of being a school-wide intervention focusing particularly on learning outcomes, my research focuses on a counselling specific approach to enhancing agency for a range of client-led outcomes.

Summary of the Literature

This literature review has established that agency is an important factor for adolescents to develop in their lives, and to have supported by the counsellor through the counselling process. Important factors to consider when enhancing agency are self-belief and self-reflectiveness, which can be supported through focusing on client strengths through solution-focused counselling. The literature on agency in counselling is focused predominantly on adults, and retrospective accounts of counselling experiences. There is also very limited research that focuses specifically on solution-focused counselling and client agency. Therefore, there is a gap in the research that investigates the within-session

process of how agency is co-constructed through solution-focused counselling, with a focus on strengths with adolescents.

Research Directions and Rationale

The literature review has helped to shape and refine the directions and rationale for this research. There are several outcome studies on counselling with adolescents for various presentations. However, given the emerging importance of strengths and agency for adolescents, there is a lack of research which focuses on the actual process of the solution-focused counselling approach in order to understand in-depth how agency is co-constructed, and in particular, its relation to a focus on strengths with adolescents.

This research was carried out in a New Zealand context with adolescents, which differs from other research in this area which has predominantly been carried out internationally and with adults. Understandings gained from this research may provide insights into how agency and strengths are co-constructed through solution-focused counselling and what difference this makes for clients' in their lives, and their therapeutic outcomes.

In the solution-focused literature and research, the focus has been predominantly around the implementation of how to carry out therapy, as opposed to clients' or counsellors' experiences of therapy (Sabalauskas, Ortolani & McCall, 2014). This guided my decision to explore a gap in this research for how agency and strengths are co-constructed with adolescents through solution-focused counselling, and how this is experienced by both the clients and the counsellor. To address this, the voice of the clients and counsellor have been woven throughout this research alongside literature to bring together the subjective meanings that have been negotiated as their stories of strengths and agency unfold Etherington, 2013).

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

As a counsellor in a secondary school, with a background in youth work and secondary school teaching, I was curious to find out how adolescents experience agency through solution-focused counselling. Alongside this curiosity, I have also wondered in my work as a counsellor, how the co-construction of strengths through the solution-focused approach could enhance agency for adolescent clients, through them believing in their ability to make change happen. I was wanting to better understand adolescents' experiences of agency and strengths through solution-focused counselling and the process of co-construction between the counsellor and client. I was also wanting to observe and reflect on my own practice and how this relates to the experiences of the client. For these reasons, I needed to choose a framework that allowed me to explore the process, the client's experience, as well as my own.

In this chapter, I will outline the paradigms and constructs that were used to carry out this research on how adolescents experience the co-construction of agency and strengths through solution focused counselling. The methodology and paradigm that will be used to carry out this research project will be a qualitative, practice-based, narrative case study approach. This will be underpinned by social constructionism and interpretive theoretical research paradigms. The solution-focused counselling approach which will be a key component of this practice-based research project is underpinned by social constructionism which makes it an appropriate conceptual framework for this research to be positioned in due to its alignment. These methodologies are introduced and described, alongside my

rationale for their choice. Explanations of social constructionism which is the theoretical orientation that underpins qualitative research philosophy, solution-focused counselling, as well as my own personal worldview is woven throughout the Methodology chapter. My personal worldview will be further outlined at the end of the Methodology chapter.

Methodology

Qualitative Research

A qualitative research approach has been chosen for this study, as it is the most appropriate framework for me to investigate adolescent experiences of co-constructing of agency and strengths through solution-focused counselling. The solution-focused approach to counselling sits within the postmodern paradigm and is foundationally oriented towards social constructionism (Jones-Smith, 2016).

This aligns with qualitative research, as it is guided by concepts of interpretivism (Hennink, Hutter, Bailey, 2011) and is a methodology which aims to produce rich descriptions of the meanings that people attach to their lives (Pistrang & Barker, 2010). It therefore aims to make sense of the participant's world (Langridge, 2007) through how they describe their versions of reality, rather than producing statistics or percentages (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016).

The process of co-construction is underpinned by the view that people's language, meanings and realities are socially constructed (Burr, 1995; Crotty, 1998), which further aligns with qualitative research and the solution-focused approach to counselling. Qualitative researchers do not see what they produce as truth, instead, it is considered an interpretation of reality that is useful to understand the human condition (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Data in this paradigm captures interactive experiences, and includes different voices, including the

researchers. It is based primarily on human perceptions and understandings, while also being conducted in a social setting, where the individual's unique experiences are investigated (Stake, 2010).

Carrying out this research through solution-focused counselling and a qualitative methodology seems a suitable fit, as the project will focus on counselling sessions which are also an unfolding interactive process in themselves. Through the stance of the solution-focused counsellor being a naïve enquirer rather than the expert, this aligns with the social constructionist stance (Hanton, 2011), and reflects the curiosity of qualitative research. It therefore enables a natural transition from counselling to research. This is further supported through the research questions being exploratory and process driven in their focus, which is suited to qualitative research, as opposed to being answered from a positivist or empirical framework.

Practice-Based Research

In my research, I will be investigating my own counselling practice, so therefore will be informed by a practice-based methodology. Practice-based research is referred to by Barkham et al. (2010) as 'bottom up' research which takes place on a grassroots level to help gain an understanding of human situations. In counselling, this involves practitioners and clients interacting in real-life settings and the research being developed out of active involvement in these settings (Bager-Charleson, 2014). As a result, there is an interplay between the researcher as a person, the circumstances that the researcher is positioned in, as well as the overall context (Bager-Charleson, 2014). When conducted in this way, research is a continual transformational process rather than being viewed as something that is separate and different from what practitioners are already doing and are intimately involved in (Bager-Charleson, 2014). It therefore offers a personal journey of continual discovery, rather than a discrete event (Du Plock, 2004). In my research, although it is a

personal journey, the purpose of the learning extends beyond myself, and hopes to contribute further to counselling work with adolescents, particularly in secondary schools to support their agency.

Practice-based research is not carried out objectively (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and therefore requires researcher transparency, which is also a requirement of qualitative research, especially through data collection, analysis and findings. Through being reflective and reflexive in nature, this acknowledges that new insights for self, and/or practice are gained through the critical process of learning through, and from experience (Finlay, 2008). Practice-based research therefore invites rich and relevant insights to be gained and helps to close the gap between research and counselling practice (Rennie, 1994).

Both counselling and practice-based research are similar in engaging collaboratively with the other person, whether they are a client or research participant, in ways that are empowering (Rennie, 1994). Since practice-based research aims to capture what is happening in routine practice, it contributes improvements from a holistic perspective (McLeod, 2013). It is therefore qualitative and highly reflexive in nature, while aiming for the counsellor to still effect change with their client (Bager-Charleson, 2014).

The solution-focused approach to counselling has a clear connection to social constructionism (Jones-Smith, 2016), and practice-based research. It was developed inductively out of close inspection of therapeutic sessions in practice-based research in order to offer new assumptions and ways of working (Lipchik et al., 2012). The connections between solution-focused counselling and social constructionism in qualitative and practice-based research indicates it is a useful approach for exploring the research questions under consideration for this project. To support this, McLeod (2013) suggests that it is important that data collection processes for research intrude as little as possible into the usual process of counselling. I therefore considered using the counselling sessions in full as my data, and

adding to this by enquiring at the end of the sessions about what has been helpful for the client, what difference this has made for them and what would be more helpful if we were to meet again (Hanton, 2011). This fits with my usual counselling practice, for a holistic, and uninterrupted research process.

Narrative Case Study

A narrative case study design has been chosen for this research project. Case studies allow a closeness to real-life situations and provide a nuanced view of what is being studied (Flyvbjerg, 2011). When I began this research project, I had decided to do three case studies. However, it became clear as I was analysing and writing up the findings, that two case studies were going to be sufficient to offer the richness of the data that had been collected to be explored, when considering the size of this project. I decided that I would not remove the data from the third case study completely and would merge some of the transcripts with another case in order to merge two together. This keeps the richness of the data, while also further protecting anonymity. This has been discussed further in the Methods chapter under *Ethical Considerations*.

Narrative case studies are diverse in their definitions and methodology. However, they can be distinguished by choosing to let the multi-sided and complex story unfold without summarising it into neat formulas or theories (Flyvbjerg, 2011). This invites a rich and contextual depth of many facets to be explored through narrative case studies. I have chosen this form of methodology as it has a close fit with the process of counselling and is therefore well suited. Underpinning the narrative methodology is a specific focus on the lived and told stories of individuals, and human interactions in relationships (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In addition to this, counselling is a place where people are invited to retell and reconstruct their lived experiences. Narrative analysis aligns with the co-constructed solution-focused counselling process, as it is guided by the purpose of investigating how

people construct meaning out of the events in their lives in order to understand how and why these stories are told (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). The process requires thorough collection, collation and synthesis of appropriate data, followed by critical analysis and reflection (Bold, 2012). Narrative case studies assume the co-construction between participant and researcher, and the researcher to engage reflexively with the data, which aligns with the practice-based research methodology.

Narrative analysis is founded on the concept that *"a story functions as a basic human means of organising and communicating information about life experience"* (McLeod, 2010, p. 207). It encompasses the participant's voice and involves a holistic understanding of how experiences are given meaning in the context of people's lives (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). Keeping the essence of the participants' narratives in the case studies is a key element of narrative research to honour their words and agency. This is because the aim is to allow the researcher to gain a sense of how the counselling was experienced by the client, researcher, or both (McLeod, 2010). This provides a narrative way of knowing that seeks to make sense of the ambiguity and complexity of human lives, that other research methods do not (Etherington, 2013). My research has been informed and guided by this methodological approach of qualitative, practice-based research using narrative analysis and case studies. This means that the research has been structured to included transcriptions of both counsellor and client voice, and researcher reflections alongside this throughout, to weave together the subjective meanings of agency and strengths, and sense of self and identity associated with this, that are negotiated as stories unfold (Etherington, 2013).

Personal Worldview

I view the world from a social constructionist lens. This worldview has influenced my epistemological stance of how knowledge is generated within this research which involves

individuals constructing their own meaning, knowledge and unique reality as they interact with the world (Crotty, 1998). I believe that meaning and truth differ for each person depending on their own life experiences, which influences their own reality. In my work, both as a counsellor and teacher, I have seen how each person experiences and interprets each conversation and interaction differently depending on their own life experiences. This aligns with the social constructionist view of how knowledge is generated, which highlights how different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to similar experiences (Crotty, 1998). I therefore believe that people construct knowledge and meaning in ways that are relevant to the unique ways that they view and experience the world. This has influenced how I have viewed the experiences and interactions between myself and the clients, and how I have interpreted the data, through the social constructionist lens throughout this research process. The qualitative and practice-based approach to research is an appropriate fit for this research as it aligns with my personal worldview of how knowledge and meaning are generated. This further supports the use of a narrative case study design which investigates how people construct meaning out of the events in their lives in order to understand how and why these stories are told (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998).

CHAPTER FOUR

Methods

Introduction

In this chapter, the research setting is described and the procedures that were carried out for participant recruitment, screening and gaining consent are explained. The solution-focused counselling approach that was used within each session is also described. Methods for data collection and analysis of the two client cases are outlined, and a description of how the findings will be presented is explained.

Research Setting

The research was conducted in a New Zealand secondary school where I was based as an intern during my studies in the Master of Counselling programme. Counselling sessions were during class time, in my office, which was based in the guidance counselling area of the school.

Participants

For my research, I chose to recruit up to three participants from Year 9-13. This decision was guided by qualitative and narrative case study research, which focuses on gathering and analysing rich data from a small sample of participants (Lichtman, 2013). I worked with three participants for three sessions each. However, after analysis of the data, I chose to present two re-storied client case studies, as this provided sufficient, rich and in-depth data.

One case has the data from two clients merged within it, as opposed to removing the data completely.

Participant Recruitment and Screening

To advertise my research project and recruit voluntary participants, I began by placing a poster in the counselling waiting area (Appendix B). My school email address was provided on the poster so students could contact me directly to ensure confidentiality in the recruitment process. I also sent an email (Appendix C) to all students at the school from Year 9-13 which outlined the research project and included the poster as an attachment. The poster provided a simplified way of explaining the research project. Within minutes of sending the email out, I received a number of responses from students who were interested in being involved. Through emailing the students, I organised times to meet up individually with the first three students who had responded in order to explain fully what would be involved if they chose to participate in the research. I used both the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) and the poster to guide our conversation. The poster was also given to participants to share with their caregivers to help explain the project when gaining consent, along with the Information Sheet for Caregivers (Appendix D). During this conversation, students were invited to ask questions and I used this time to also enquire about whether their reason for seeking counselling would be suitable for the research, for it to be manageable in order to ensure safety for the client in the research process. This aspect of recruitment screening was carried out in order to uphold the principles in the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) Code of Ethics (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016) when carrying out research as a counsellor, and prioritising counselling over the research. Three students were recruited for the research and all three participants had three counselling sessions each which spanned over the course of a month. The students ranged in age from 15-18 years old, were all female and identified as New Zealand European. I had hoped to recruit participants who were diverse in their age, gender and

ethnicity. However, the people who volunteered first were all in the senior school, female and New Zealand European. Due to my recruitment process of offering the first people who had responded to be involved in the project, this resulted in the limited diversity of the participants. I decided to recruit participants in this way because it would avoid being selective, or prioritising certain people when picking clients for the research. Ethnicity was not explored as a variable in this research so regardless of this factor, each unique case provided useful and in-depth information as I explored how agency and strengths were co-constructed and experienced by adolescent clients in solution-focused counselling.

Participant Researcher

I am a secondary school teacher as well as a student counsellor, and I identify as New Zealand European. In this research I had two roles of being both the researcher and a participant in the process through being the counsellor. I participated actively in the counselling process, while also gathering information through observing, listening and reflecting on each case which occurred both within the session, and afterwards (Lichtman, 2013). As a result of the reflective and reflexive research process involved in managing the dual role of researcher and participant-counsellor, I believe that I have become a more skilled practitioner with more enhanced understanding of how agency and strengths are co-constructed through solution-focused counselling with adolescents (Lichtman, 2013). There are challenges present in managing the dual role of being both a participant in the research, as well as the researcher. This has been discussed further in the Ethical Considerations section under *Dual Relationship in Practice-Based Research*.

Consent and Confidentiality

In this research, the data was kept confidential and the anonymity of both the school and the participants was assured by providing pseudonyms. This is further described in the

Confidentiality and Anonymity section under *Ethical Considerations*. Students who were interested in being involved were given information sheets and consent forms for both themselves and their caregivers. These documents were approved by the University of Canterbury, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee (ERHEC) (Appendix A) who require students under the age of 18 to gain caregiver consent before being involved in any research. The information on the documents also follow the NZAC Code of Ethics which states "*Counsellors shall provide research participants with sufficient information about the purpose and nature of the research to enable informed consent to be freely given. This information shall include the right to withdraw*" (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016, p. 13). To ensure informed consent is gained, and autonomy is upheld, participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

In the initial meeting with each potential participant, students were asked to discuss the research and their possible involvement in it with their caregivers by showing them the information sheets and accompanying poster, which advertised and explained the project. If both the student and their caregivers agreed with the proposed process and returned the signed consent forms to me, then we began working together. Throughout this process, I emphasised that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time, and their data would be destroyed.

Procedures

All three participants were offered up to three sessions to be involved in the research. They could have less sessions, or more, however any sessions beyond three would not form part of the research data. Counselling sessions went for up to one hour each in duration, as this aligned with the school timetable. After each session, I had intended to ask follow-up interview questions about the session and the client's self-belief and agency, which involved

semi-structured questions and a scaling questionnaire similar to the Session Rating Scale (SRS) from Miller et al. (2003) to facilitate this discussion. However, these procedures of using the scaling questionnaire and subsequent semi-structured interview questions for data collection were not used beyond the first session. This was because there appeared to be no particular benefit for using them. Instead, the normal solution-focused counselling process of asking questions at the end of the session to gather client feedback was used, as this obtained the relevant information for the research (Hanton, 2011). This has been described further below in Data Collection under *Client Feedback*. Counselling sessions were intended to take place weekly, however due to illness for two clients, this stretched over the course of a month. A solution-focused approach was used in all counselling sessions, as described below.

Solution-Focused Counselling

The counselling sessions included as data in this research project were carried out using a solution-focused approach. The solution focused approach to counselling, which is the modality that I predominantly work from, is underpinned by social constructionism. The solution focused approach views clients as the expert on their own lives, and that each clients' context and worldview is unique and best known and understood by them. The work done by the counsellor and client is collaborative, where the counsellor takes on the position of being a naïve enquirer, which uses questioning as a way to understand the client and their context, and to find possibilities for change (De Jong & Miller, 1995). I have used questioning from the solution-focused approach to uncover the client's strengths in ways that are described from their own perspective, so that they can language this, and make personal meanings for themselves. This means that the progress a client makes towards their goals will come from the counsellor assisting the client to find what works best for them, in the context of their own life. This helps the counsellor and client to see what the client is hoping

for, what has worked for them before, when things have been better, and how they have been able to make change happen before using their own strengths, strategies and resources (De Jong & Berg, 2013). Through the use of expectant language in my questioning with clients, this aims to empower them by implicitly communicating hope and optimism. This supports the client to language their own strengths and resources, which can support their self-belief, confidence and agency in order to make steps towards their goals, preferred future, and preferred identity. This was the approach that I used in the counselling sessions throughout this research. I used similar types of questions with each client, however I adapted my approach and the emphases of each question to suit what works best for each client (Hanton, 2011). I aimed to invite clients to provide rich and detailed descriptions to the solution-focused questions that I asked, so that they could story a new and hopeful narrative, with them being the authors of this, to enhance their agency. The key solution-focused questions that I used to elicit client descriptions that supported the co-construction of agency and strengths have been outlined above in the Literature Review under *Enhancing Agency and Strengths through Solution-Focused Counselling,* and further in the Discussion chapter.

Strengths Cards

Strengths cards are a resource from St Lukes Innovative Resources based in Australia (St Lukes Innovative Resources, 2008)**.** There are 40 plastic coated cards in full colour, each identifying a strength. All of the cards are illustrated with pictures that help to convey the positive strengths and characteristics in action. The solution-focused approach aligns with the strengths-based approach and the use of strengths cards, as they all highlight the resources, skills and strengths that a client has (Hanton, 2011; Jones-Smith, 2016). It also views the client as the expert on their life, through them identifying and describing their strengths. These cards have been used by other solution-focused practitioners such as

Hanton (2011) and Bateman and Milner (2011) who use them in both individual and family therapy. This approach has been described by Bateman and Milner (2011) as being effective at supporting the process of "*getting a rich description of how a particular strength has been displayed*" (p. 33). I used strengths cards as a resource in my research to support my solution-focused counselling work in the sessions with participants. I did this by inviting clients to describe how they display their particular strengths, as suggested by Bateman and Milner (2011), due to its close alignment with the solution-focused approach to support clients' self-belief and agency.

Data Collection

Data were gathered from a variety of sources. This follows the suggestion from Creswell (2014) in order to have a robust study that generates a rich and in-depth understanding of the interactive process. When carried out alongside a rigorous data analysis process, this helps to give greater validity to the findings (Creswell, 2014). The data were gathered over nine sessions with three client-participants who had three sessions each. Although, two re-storied case studies were presented, with data from two clients being merged. Data sources include session transcripts, video recordings, feedback from questions at the end of the sessions, pictures of the visual work co-constructed in the sessions, session notes, and notes from my reflexive journaling collected throughout the process.

Video Recordings

The most significant form of data collection that I used throughout this research was through video recordings of all sessions on an iPad in the counselling room. The camera on the iPad was positioned to capture the counsellor, the client, and the whiteboard. This enabled the voices, movements, body language, facial expressions, and interactions between both people to be captured and analysed (McLeod, 2010), as well as the co-construction on the

whiteboard in the session. This enabled me to watch the cases in their entirety, and then go back and review particular aspects of each session in their full detail, which offered richer data than audio alone (McLeod, 2010). This supported me to noticed new things each time I watched, which I may not have remembered or realised while in the session, or just listening to an audio recording. Crocket (2011) suggests that video recordings can make a significant contribution to the growth and development of a counsellor and their practice. These new observations were noted down and also became part of the data.

Session Transcripts

As I watched and listened to the video recordings of the sessions, I typed them up to transcribe significant moments. However, I ended up transcribing the sessions nearly in full. This was because as I listened over and over, I was able to make connections to various parts of the session and how this co-constructed a sense of agency and strengths. Through this, I realised that the stories clients shared over the course of the session added different layers to the research. This gave me an in-depth understanding of the data through engaging with it in full through my process of transcription and by reading and re-reading these transcriptions in my process of data analysis which generated new, richer understandings.

Client Feedback

When I began the research, I had intended to use a scaling questionnaire to facilitate discussion in the form of a semi-structured interview. This would occur at the end of each session and take between 5-10 minutes to complete. The scaling questionnaire was similar to the Session Rating Scale (SRS) from Miller et al. (2003) which is a resource often used in solution-focused counselling sessions. My intention was for the scaling questionnaire to invite participants to reflect on their belief in their ability to make change happen and for this to be marked on a scale to then facilitate further discussion. A semi-structured interview

would then take place to provide the client the opportunity to reflect on their experience of the session in regard to the co-construction of agency and strengths. However, after using this method in my first research session I decided not to continue. I felt as though it interrupted the normal counselling process and served the purposes of the research as opposed to the client's needs. However, it was not necessary for the research, as I could follow the usual solution-focused counselling process of asking for client feedback at the end of the session as this obtained relevant information (Hanton, 2011). I found that this better served the client's needs and provided a more genuine counselling session, without the interruption of research procedures (explained further in the Discussion chapter under *Strengths and Limitations*). To address this, I removed the scaling questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions and followed my usual solution-focused counselling practice of gathering feedback about the session. I asked questions like *"What has been helpful from our session today?", "What difference has that made for you?"* and *"What could we do differently next time so that it is more useful for you?"* (Hanton, 2011). The co-construction of these normal solution-focused counselling questions are presented in the findings. This approach positioned me more naturally as a researcher in the solution-focused counselling setting by following a standard practice that I use in my sessions to invite the client to share their perspective on the session, and to facilitate any changes they wish to make to our sessions. This did not have a specific focus on answering the research questions. However, it enabled the clients to have the opportunity to respond freely which gathered data that was significantly practice-based and highlighted what parts of the session they found helpful, which aligned with supporting client agency.

Pictures of Visual Work

Any work that was created in a visual form in the sessions through what the client had made, or from what we had co-constructed together became part of the data. This was done by taking photos of the strengths cards participants had identified, the relationship map that one

client generated and the final pictures of what had been created on the whiteboard throughout our sessions. This supports the suggestion from Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016) that pictures take the place of words, as they have the ability to convey things that words cannot. It provided me with the ability to see aspects of our counselling session in more detailed and complete ways. For example, by seeing the whiteboard as a final product of our session in its entirety. I have not included these pictures in my presentation of the findings as they include specific details about the clients. In order to protect the client's anonymity, I have decided to use these pictures in my process of data analysis, as opposed to incorporating them into how I have presented the findings.

Session Notes

After each session I took client notes, which is a requirement as part of my usual counselling practice at school. These notes provided a condensed summary of each session right after it occurred, which retained some information that I wasn't able to by the time I did my own personal reflection on the session. These notes were included as data. However, they provided a basis for me to further reflect on.

Journal

Throughout the research I engaged in reflexive journaling to weave together and better understand my experiences of being both a counsellor and researcher in this process. I would reflect on each session the day that it had occurred, although this was not always directly after sessions and would often happen at the end of the school day, when I got home, as well as after watching video recordings. These reflections captured my thoughts and questions, and as I began writing, I noticed that this facilitated a process of discovery of new thoughts and questions, while also shaping my own process of meaning making. I have not included excerpts of the journal in the presentation of research findings. However, these reflections have informed how I have re-storied the client cases with both my own and the

client's voices woven through. For reflexive practice-based research, this supported my ability to look at problems and situations from different perspectives and lenses (Bager-Charleson, 2014). This helped me to shape my voice as the researcher, and enhance rigour and transparency (Darawsheh & Stanley, 2014).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research project was given by the ERHEC at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand (Appendix A). Prior to carrying out this research project, I obtained informed consent from the school principal, student participants, and their caregivers (Appendix D). The NZAC Code of Ethics (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016) informed my research and counselling practice as this provides guidelines on how to carry out both counselling and research in the counselling field. Some key ethical considerations in regard to this research project include the dual roles in practice-based research, confidentiality and anonymity, avoidance of harm, and issues with video recording (Bager-Charleson, 2014; McLeod, 2012).

Dual Relationship in Practice-Based Research

In practice-based research, the dual relationships that will be present with the researcher being a participant and counsellor, and the client also being a participant, requires a collaborative relationship of respect, trust and reciprocity. I worked to conduct the research with sensitivity, awareness, insight and knowledge to manage the potential impact participating in this research may have on participants and myself. This involved being aware of, and minimising any perceived power imbalances to maximise equality (Bager-Charleson, 2014). This was especially important in the context of counselling, as Gibson and Cartwright (2013) suggest that it may be difficult for adolescents experiencing distress to assert their agency in these settings. Having a strong therapeutic relationship supports the

conversations to be open and honest, in order to ensure that rich and meaningful data may be gathered. The solution-focused approach to counselling supports this way of working with potential power imbalances and supporting the therapeutic relationship through being client-led and by the counsellor viewing the client as the expert on their life. Reflexivity is imperative in practice-based research. Reflexivity involves a continuous process of self-reflection that the researcher engages in to generate awareness about their actions, feelings and perceptions (Darawsheh & Stanley, 2014). This supports the counsellor to consider the factors that may be influencing the way they think and engage with the data. Through this process of reflexivity, the researcher can alter the ways they reach decisions (Darawsheh & Stanley, 2014). This enables a process of transparency as the researcher brings their thoughts to a conscious level to then become aware of their subjective influence over the research process and the counselling (Darawsheh & Stanley, 2014).

Confidentiality and Anonymity

To ensure confidentiality as expected within the ERHEC and the NZAC Code of Ethics (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016), the identities of participants and the research location are anonymous. This is done through the use of pseudonyms for participants names and by not stating the name of the school where the research took place. The pseudonyms were decided on collaboratively to involve the participants in the decision-making process of protecting their anonymity (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016). Due to the methodology of this research being conducted through narrative analysis, this includes rich descriptions and comprehensive sections of transcript. To protect anonymity, I have changed details about the client's lives in how I have re-storied their narratives and in the specific details of the transcripts. I have also merged two cases together to further protect anonymity, instead of completely removing the third case which I no longer had space for (further described below in *Data Analysis*). I ensured this only protected their identities, rather than changing the nature of the findings.

Counselling is a confidential service, however there are exceptions to this when *"there is serious danger in the immediate or foreseeable future to the client or others"* in order to reduce risk and harm (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016, p. 8). However, there were further limits of confidentiality in this in the research due to the requirements of the ERHEC. These requirements stated that participants under 18 need to have obtained informed consent from their caregivers to be able to participate. Having caregiver consent is not the usual process for students who come to counselling at school, which is a confidential service. When considering how to manage this limit of confidentiality with participants, I followed the guidelines of the NZAC Code of Ethics which states that, *"Counsellors should take all reasonable steps to communicate clearly the extent and limits of the confidentiality they offer clients"* (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2016, p. 8). To address this, I explained the limits of confidentiality in this research process which differ to engaging with counselling when research is not involved. I did this in the initial meeting I had with potential participants, to ensure they were able to make an informed decision regarding this limit of confidentiality with their caregivers knowing they would be coming to counselling, if they chose to take part in the research.

Avoidance of Harm

Throughout research, avoidance of harm for participants is imperative, as they should not be disadvantaged in any way by participating. To ensure that I addressed avoidance of harm with the participants in the research, I always ensured that the client's needs were central and prioritised over the research. This supports the relational responsibility that narrative inquirers have in research to consider how the re-storying might impact participants now, and into the future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Craig & Huber, 2007). In all situations, the research process and requirements were seen as secondary to the therapeutic process (Bager-Charleson, 2014). This followed the NZAC Code of Ethics (New Zealand Association

of Counsellors, 2016) for when the counsellor is in a dual relationship as the researcher which states that, *"When research purposes may conflict with counselling purposes, counsellors should ensure that the counselling relationship is given priority"* (p. 13). My awareness of these issues was enhanced through receiving both clinical and research supervision separately. I brought some of my client cases to discuss in supervision as suggested by Wosket (1999) so that my reflexive practice could be sharpened by an experienced counsellor to ensure I was effectively maintaining my role and practice as a counsellor. Through engaging in the process of reflexivity, rigour is enhanced (Darawsheh & Stanley, 2014). I also received support from my academic supervisors who guided me in my role particularly as a researcher throughout the process. This ensured that I was doing my best for my clients. The solution-focused approach also supports avoidance of harm as it focuses on strengths, hopes and building solutions, so the re-storying of the narrative cases has been described through viewing clients in this way (Hanton, 2011).

Video Recording

Another ethical consideration for this research was the video recordings of the sessions. McLeod (2010) states that video recordings capture the *"body posture, direction of gaze and interactional synchrony"* (p. 85) in ways that are not possible with audio alone. Crocket (2011) suggests that video recordings support the ongoing development and competence of a practitioner which has influenced my choice to use this method of data collection. This supported my ongoing practice with the research participants and will contribute to the learning that I can use in my ongoing practice. When using this method of data collection, Crocket (2011) cautions that it is important that clients have the ability to change their mind at any point about being recorded. I enquired each session about whether the client was comfortable to be recorded so that they were invited to have the opportunity to change their mind, as 're-negotiable consent' (Ethical Research Involving Children, 2019). The information that was given to participants and their caregivers prior to them agreeing to

being involved in the research outlined the intention of the video recordings and who they would be viewed by, which included only myself and my university supervisor. This also included how the recordings would be stored which followed the recommendation from both the ERHEC and Crocket (2011) to be on a password protected device and deleted once the purpose of the video has been served. In the sessions the iPad was always set up in a position the client was comfortable with and had a blank screen so that the recoding was not visible. I took these steps in order to manage the possible compromises video recording may have on interrupting the research process through being more visible, as outlined by Bogden and Biklen (2007).

Rigour and Trustworthiness

By having a clear research focus, appropriate methodological and research processes, multiple sources of data, and by providing detailed explanations of these, this supports the reader to be confident in the research process and the accurate presentation of results (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The multiple sources of data that yielded rich, detailed and in-depth data allows the narrative case analysis to be more convincing to the reader. Following methodological practices that ensure rigour and trustworthiness supports the degree of credibility and validity a study has (Harrison, MacGibbon & Morton, 2001). This includes the accuracy of the results, from the perspective of the researcher, client and readers, as suggested by Creswell (2014). When writing this research, the participants were regarded as a potential audience. In doing this, I endeavoured to avoid unintentional hurt by considering how it would be to read this project through their eyes (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). In narrative research, the findings are usually presented back to the participants to look at in order to invite their feedback on what has been written, to honour their voice and support the credibility and trustworthiness of the research (Harrison, MacGibbon & Morton, 2001). Due to the findings being written at the end of the school year, and the students moving on from

school, my ability to communicate with them on the school email addresses they provided was no longer possible. This has been further outlined in the Discussion chapter under *Strengths and Limitations.* This addresses the importance of this process for enhancing reflexivity and gaining feedback on how the clients respond to how the narratives were re-storied in order to avoid harm and support the trustworthiness of the findings.

My research supervisor also reviewed my raw data, initial researcher interpretations and my interpretive data analysis with how I had re-storied the sessions. This was helpful for me to refine my research focus, and to receive feedback that supported the validity of the research as it developed over time (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). These conversations also worked to minimise any researcher bias over how I had engaged with the data. By being reflexive in each part of the research process, I was aware of how my own experiences and view may be influencing my assumptions in regard to how agency and strengths were co-constructed in the sessions and experienced by the clients.

To further support the rigour and trustworthiness of the research, I have included accurate session transcripts throughout. These transcripts show the speech and context of the counsellor and the client through their questions and responses being provided in full. This offers the reader the opportunity to independently and directly evaluate what I have written and how I have engaged with the text, which exemplifies effective narrative analysis. The re-storying of the sessions from the basis of the transcripts is filtered through the researcher's eyes, however the time spent ensuring accuracy of these transcripts helps to provide a valid base for the research (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). By providing thorough information on the research process, the solution-focused counselling sessions, clients and the data, this enables readers to make their own interpretations regarding the research focus and findings (McLeod, 2011). Readers can therefore determine how credible and relevant to the situation they believe the findings are, or not (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The in-depth information provided from the sessions will also hopefully enable the reader to share more fully in the

experiences of the counsellor and the client, and the journeys that clients were actively involved in when making change happen in their lives.

Data Analysis

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a term that captures personal and human aspects of experience over time and acknowledges the relationship between individual experience and the wider social and cultural contexts present (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It offers a way of gathering, analysing and representing people's stories as told by them (Etherington, 2013). Polkinghorne (1995) describes two types of narrative inquiry. In this research, I have used the approach of *narrative analysis*, as opposed to *analysis of narratives*. Narrative analysis involves a pulling together of the data and values the messiness, depth, texture and differences present in people's lived experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative analysis provides a cohesive account of the data, where events, actions and happenings are brought together and analysed as stories, such as a case study which I have used in this research (Polkinghorne, 2005). This enables analysis and meaning making to occur throughout the research process, as opposed to being carried out separately after data collection (Etherington, 2013). This provides a harmonious and organic process of data analysis throughout the research process (Etherington, 2013).

In my research, the focus was on the co-construction of agency and strengths, which aligns with narrative analysis as it involves the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the participants (Etherington, 2013). Throughout this process, the researcher enquires about how pieces of the story make sense together (Etherington, 2013), alongside their own insight and intuition due to their own familiarity with the data (Taylor, Bogdan & De Vault, 2016). To carry out narrative analysis in my research, the research questions guided my

analysis, which Polkinghorne (2005) describes as being *"the glue that connects the parts together"* (p. 18). After each session I wrote down my initial reflections. I then watched and listened to the research counselling sessions in full, and transcribed moments that appeared to be significant for the research questions and the client through them expressing a shift in their agency, or positive change in their situation through their strengths. I then made further notes and reflections of what I had noticed, particularly being guided by the questions of 'why' and 'how' did this happen as suggested by Riessman and Speedy (2007), to interpret the story deeper. These notes were also added to from discussions with my supervisors about the data. Following this, I then went through the video recordings in a more systematic and detailed way by transcribing the sessions nearly in full. This provided me with a way to analyse the data in-depth, in order to provide the voice of both the client, and myself as the counsellor more fully. This is part of both practice-based research and narrative analysis, in order to present a co-constructed and contextual narrative beyond the researcher's interpretation (McLeod, 2010). I then started to look more closely at how the pieces of transcript related to the research questions which Polkinghorne (2005) suggests is what enables the researcher to refine what data should be included. From here, I analysed how the finished stories can come together in ways that offer both order and meaningfulness to illuminate what is in the data (Polkinghorne, 2005). This was about listening to the voices within each narrative (Riessman, 2008) and the descriptions they gave for how agency and strengths were co-constructed and experienced. I decided to present the findings as chapters of the client's stories for how agency and strengths were co-constructed and experienced through solution-focused counselling. These aspects of the client's stories were identified through the process of narrative analysis which was guided by the research questions. The chapters highlight significant parts of each clients' story of how agency and strengths were co-constructed. Although the titles of the chapters are the same, the descriptions of how these elements contributed to the client's sense of agency and recognition of strengths are unique to each client. This sought to re-story how the clients

experienced the co-construction of agency and strengths through solution-focused counselling.

During this part of narrative analysis, I realised that I had more data than was necessary for the size and length of this research project from the three case studies I had generated. I then pragmatically decided to move ahead with the two cases that were most different from each other. I then decided to merge some of the transcripts from two cases together, rather than removing one case completely. This decision enabled me to go into greater depth across fewer participants and keep the richness of the data within the appropriate size of this project. It also supported client confidentiality further through bringing the details of two people together into one case. Narrative research is often focused on rich descriptions of one individual or small group, so this has not affected the trustworthiness of the findings or overall research design (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). However, I am aware of how my choice of transcripts and cases that have been presented may have been different if chosen by someone else. My guiding thoughts were always about findings ways to best serve the research questions in the process of meaning making. This occurred through what was generated from both my experience of the data by being in the sessions and through my analysis of the data afterwards, as this a fluid and organic process in narrative analysis (Etherington, 2013).

Presentation of Findings

There are many ways of presenting findings in the field of narrative analysis. I have decided to present the findings as two case studies. The cases include my voice as the researcher and counsellor, and the voice of the client. The narrative cases are presented as chapters of the client's stories to describe how agency and strengths were co-constructed and experienced. Throughout these cases, the voices of other solution-focused practitioners

have also been woven through, alongside both mine and the client's voices as I have re-storied the co-constructed accounts of agency and strengths. St. Pierre (2011) suggests that this helps to acknowledge and illuminate non-visible and untextualised data that has already informed thinking and writing. I have included numerous sections of transcript in each chapter of the client's stories for the purpose of showing that the data interpretation is firmly based in the experience and perspectives of the participants (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). By including large sections of transcript, this shows the unfolding nature of the counselling process through the voice of the client and the counsellor which also highlights co-construction in greater depth. In the discussion, this offers an epilogue about the co-construction of agency and strengths across the narratives as an extension to the findings. I hope that this, alongside the findings, offers the reader an engaging and insightful experience of how agency and strengths were co-constructed with adolescent clients through solution-focused counselling in a secondary school setting.

CHAPTER FIVE

Findings: Introduction

Introduction

In this section, the cases with each client will be described through the lens of narrative analysis. The findings will be presented as chapters of the clients' story, which describes the solution-focused counselling process that focuses on strengths, and how this contributed to the clients' sense of agency. The cases will tell the stories of the clients' counselling experiences, to honour their voice and the process that they went through to make change happen in their lives as a result of their agency and strengths. The voice of the counsellor will be woven through the client's stories, to bring together the different experiences of the co-constructed counselling process. The chapters presented in both of the case studies will relate to the research question: *How are agency and strengths co-constructed through the solution-focused counselling process with adolescents?*

Definition of Agency

In this research, I have used the following definition from Zimmerman and Cleary (2006) to highlight the role of self-belief in personal agency, and how this connects to the effectiveness of carrying out specific tasks. The definition is as follows, *"Personal agency refers to one's capability to originate and direct actions for given purposes. It is influenced by the belief in one's effectiveness in performing specific tasks, which is termed self-efficacy, as well as by one's actual skill"* (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006, p. 45). This definition for agency has been chosen for this research because it illustrates how self-belief is connected to agency and the process of making change happen, which was my intention to explore in this

research, as well as a significant finding in the data. This emphasised my hope to explore how agency was co-constructed through solution-focused counselling as it is client-focused and explores clients' strengths in the process, which can enhance belief in the client's ability to make change happen, and in turn, their sense of agency.

Social Constructionism

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that it is important to identify and be transparent about the theoretical position of analysis, which has an impact on the nature of the data and what it represents. The findings of this research have been generated from a social constructionist and interpretive lens. The solution-focused approach sits within the postmodern and social constructionist family of therapies (Jones-Smith, 2016). Through this approach to therapy, languaging by clients and therapists is central to therapeutic change. The client is seen as the expert, which means that knowledge of the solution does not come from within the therapist. Instead, it is an evolving and collaborative conversation where knowledge and meaning are generated in the space between people (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). From the view of narrative analysis, this will be presented as an active process of the client participating in a conversation with the therapist, from which a new story or solution emerges.

The Use of 'Chapters' in the Narrative Analysis

The narrative analysis of the two cases is presented as chapters. The solution-focused counselling process is not a clear formula and instead may be adapted to suit what works best for the client (Hanton, 2011). Across the cases and within the solution-focused approach, the work is centred around the client. However, the approach also considers the role of others in the relational contexts of the client's life to help build solutions (De Jong &

Berg, 2013). Furthermore, the solution focused approach has future focus, which invites clients to consider new possibilities beyond their present challenges and what they are hoping for instead. As goals become defined, particularly through rich descriptions of their preferred future, the clients identify and describe the resources, strengths and skills that they can use to move in the direction of their goals. This may elicit instances of success that they have had in the past, which can inform clients of what is helpful for them and what is already working well in their lives.

As the chapters wrap up, the counselling process is described in detail to inform practitioners about how the co-constructed solution-focused counselling process supported client agency. Agency outcomes are then finally described to provide an overall summary of how agency was experienced by the client and what difference this made for them, both within themselves and in their lives. The chapters are presented in this order of Connection to *Self, Connection to Others, Connection to Future* and *Connection to What Helps* to describe significant parts of the solution-focused process and how they contributed to the clients' sense of agency and strengths. The final two chapters of *Connection to the Counselling Process* and *Connection to Agency Outcomes* highlight how co-construction within the counselling process invited clients to elicit descriptions of their sense of agency and strengths.

The Use of the Word 'Connection' in the Chapters

The word 'connection' is used in the title of the chapters as it highlights the solution-focused and social constructionist process of the client using language to describe and story their lives in ways that gives meaning and shape to them. Through the participants' languaging themselves and their preferred identities, relationships with others, preferred future and what is helpful for them, they constructed personal meanings and made connections between

what they hoped for and how they wanted to work towards that, which was recognised as

further developing their sense of agency and strengths.

CHAPTER SIX

Findings: Chloe's Story

Character Introduction: Chloe

Chloe is an 18-year-old, New Zealand European, female high school student. She is a caring person who supports others, willingly takes on responsibilities and is reliable to see them through. She does this in her friendships, her involvement in activities at school and in her work with children. She has a strong desire to help others, which she recognises is a way of her connecting with the experience of losing her mum and turning her feelings of guilt and responsibility over this experience into action to help make peace with the pain. I observed perseverance and resilience as clear strengths of hers through how committed she was to her goals and how she had managed to cope. This view of the client, with their strengths and competencies, is a foundational part of the solution-focused approach, instead of describing problems and deficits that need to be resolved (Hanton, 2011). This influences the way that a counsellor will speak to and hear their clients (Hanton, 2011).

Synopsis of the Counselling Process

Chloe sought counselling to gain support to start to share about her experience of losing her mum, which occurred traumatically when she was 10 years old. She described how she coped by bottling it up and hiding how she feels. She wanted to start sharing more openly with others, and through doing this, gain support from them, and find ways to manage her thoughts associated with the experience. She also wanted to show a more authentic version of herself to others as she recognised she was like two people in one body as a result of hiding how she feels. We worked together for three sessions, and through this time, we

explored who her support people were through a relationship mapping activity and scaled her preferred future for expressing and managing her thoughts and emotions. She called this *"Project Emotions".* We also explored how she has grown and been shaped by her experiences. We did this using scaling to explore her description of her past, present and hopes for her future self. This highlighted her strengths in how she has coped and managed at the time of the event and since then. This then enabled us to draw on what has been helpful for her that she can continue to do. This was the first time that she had spoken about this event in detail with someone outside of her family, so this was a significant time of exploration for her, which we did gently and at her pace.

Chapters of Chloe's Story

Chapter One: Connection to Self

When Chloe began counselling, I asked her what she wanted to get out of our sessions. She was clear and direct when she described her goals of managing her thoughts about the death of her mum and starting to tell people how she feels. However, as this conversation unfolded throughout the first session, Chloe shared that she had not spoken much about this before, so was not sure about what she would want to share. She mentioned that it would be helpful for her to describe how things were for herself first, to make sense of this, before sharing with others. As we discussed what difference sharing with her friends would make for her, a meaning-making process occurred from Chloe describing how things were for her currently, which then moved onto shape her preferred identity as a result of working towards her goals. The solution-focused approach puts the focus on the client (De Jong & Berg, 2013), and the following conversation invites the client to voice what parts of herself she is wanting to see more of, which initiates her sense of agency. Solution-focused questions such as this are designed to elicit what clients want for themselves and the role they can

play in making positive change, rather than focusing on the problematic others (De Jong & Berg, 2013). Chloe noticed that she is different in different relational settings and has a sense of responsibility to be happy, in order to make others feel happy. She hoped to tell her friends about her experience, because her family has journeyed through it with her, so they understand. However, she has not told her friends before and is pretending to be happy around them for their benefit. As she described her preferred future of wanting to be more open and honest with them about how she things are for her, she also described her preferred identity of having "*proper real happiness and getting real enjoyment out of being with them, and life".* Our conversation unfolded in this way:

Ok cool, that's good to have clarity that it is friends who are the people you are wanting support from more. What difference would that make for you?

Yeah, it's my friends I want to tell because they don't fully know about what's happened, so it is harder for them to support me and just be there. I've been different around my family than I have been around my friends, I guess by pretending to be happy and smiling and stuff. I am really quiet at home. I don't talk and just sit there quietly on my phone. I pretend to be happy more when I'm around my friends, cos I know that if I'm unhappy, they will feel unhappy. I try to pretend for their benefit.

I'm sensing some responsibility that you are feeling over that? You are pretending to be happy around your friends, but at home you are more quiet. What would you say is the most accurate representation of yourself right now?

I feel like now that I kinda wanna start talking about it, I'm not gonna be as like, pretending or hiding as much cos if I talk about it and try to work on things, then I could kind of go back to my old self, and my friends can see that part of me, not the part that was affected by the death.

What would be the parts of yourself you would you want to see more of?

Proper real happiness, and like getting real enjoyment out of being with them and life. I don't wanna focus too hard on what happened, and I don't wanna let it hold me

back in how I truly express myself. I guess to just have a real, good, positive outlook

on life. I wanna be able to see things in places and not just instantly remember what

happened that night.

Chloe was able to express a clear hope for how she is wanting things to be for herself which led to her constructing new possibilities for her relational contexts, between herself and others. This interaction elicited rich detail through the descriptions she provided about what she wants to see more of in herself. This exchange indicated some languaging around identity change. Here she is acknowledging this change within herself personally, while also acknowledging how she has coped in her relationships with others. Moving forwards, Chloe was hoping to show more parts of herself that were not affected by the death of her mum. Later on in the session, this topic came up again as she spoke about her hope of not wanting to be affected by the experience. She said:

I want to show that I haven't let the past affect how I am, like I haven't let it fully affect

and change me.

I challenged her gently on this by asking:

In what ways would you feel ok that it has affected you? What parts of

yourself would you want to say "I am changed by this experience and I am ok

with this change?"

I guess gaining the support that I didn't have and not letting it like, I guess, being

proud that I didn't let it ruin my life. It has made me wanna help others, so they don't

have to experience it.

What would that look like, wanting to help others?

I want to make sure they are having fun, and they have that support system and can talk about things cos that's something I didn't have. I didn't have that support when I needed it.

I challenged Chloe on this because my perception was that she would have been affected by the death of her mum because that is a significant experience to have been through. However, I wanted to give her the opportunity to have a voice over how the experience has shaped her, and by languaging this, to have ownership and choice over that. I had also hoped that this question might prompt her to consider her strengths and where she already sees those parts of herself present in her life, to recognise how she has grown and been shaped by the experience in ways that she is proud of. This gave her a sense of personal agency and control over how she viewed the changes within herself as a result of her experiences. This process placed her in the driver's seat as an active participant, rather than passively having her identity be constructed by societal discourses about how death and grief impact people, which may be informing her view of herself. My questioning in this transcript was informed by solution-focused grief therapy, which encourages the use of questions that elicit possibility of a preferred future and collaboration on the construction of ways forward beyond the grief (Butler & Powers, 1996).

In our third session, we worked on Chloe's other goal of managing the thoughts she has, which are associated with the death of her mum. These thoughts bring about feelings of blame, responsibility and guilt which she notices holds her back in how she expresses herself. To do this, we scaled how she has grown and been shaped by the experience by looking at how she was when it happened, how she is now, and how she wants to be in the future. She drew pictures of herself in these three stages and then wrote descriptive words around the pictures. This invited a process of describing her preferred identity, while also noticing how she has coped in the past and how her preferred identity might further shape the meaning of her past experiences for herself.

Back then when it happened, it was like I had two very different sides of myself.

So, this is the part of you that you felt was the more happy, positive side that others would see. And when you were on your own, this quiet and closed-off side would be more a part of you. How are things for you now?

Sometimes there are still the different sides of myself. Like at home, there are days when I'm quiet, but it's not like every day. I'm not sick as often, like I never get sick these days. I'm getting the support that I didn't have. I am way more open and less guarded. I am loud and have more of a smile on my face.

How would you draw yourself, and your body position?

I would have folded arms.

What does folded arms represent for you?

That I am holding myself.

What is that doing?

I guess it is like partly protecting myself and giving me comfort. At home, when I am sitting on the couch, I sit with a cushion comforting me, but also acting like a barrier. There are still days when it's like, hard. I think I've realised that the blame was so strong at the time because I had to do so much for myself and look after myself, so I was made to be more responsible than I should have been at my age.

Looking back at that now, what ways could you show kindness and compassion to your 10-year-old self having to do things that a 10-year-old shouldn't have to do? Are there some words you would want to say to your 10-year-old self?

I would say that even though it may feel have felt like you should blame yourself at the time, you didn't know what you needed to do. You should be proud of what you did do. I guess, like if I was to go back then I would say you should be proud of yourself, and that you've come so far since then. To let her know that things do get better, and that no matter what she shouldn't blame herself.

Yeah, wow... How has that feeling of blame shifted as you have gotten older? As you look back and reflect on that?

That I shouldn't be blaming myself. That I wasn't in the wrong and I shouldn't feel mad at myself for not knowing what I should have done.

What's that like for you going back to that and telling yourself that?

I guess it feels good. To kinda like, imagine it. It helps to understand it, and it helps to see how far I've come from back then to now, and how the thoughts have changed.

As we described her preferred identity through her future self, she expressed that she wants to have a strong sense of knowing who she is. I then went on to ask:

And who are you? How would you describe who you are, and who you want to be?

Someone who has gone through something very hard, and didn't think they would bounce back from it, but they did. They have grown from those experiences and are able to support others who have been through a hard time too.

How has this been, looking back over a journey of your life from a really difficult point, to where you are wanting to be heading towards?

It's been helpful realising how I've changed, from the 10-year-old me, to the 'me' now. I guess, having the awareness that back then I was two different people in one body, but now I am one person in one body, and even though I have been through so much, I have been able to keep being strong, and being that one person, and I am proud of myself.

How should we draw your future self then?

Arms open wide and up, like in triumph! And smiling.

(Chloe then took a picture of the whiteboard)

This interaction involved a co-constructed process of meaning making, where Chloe spoke with agency about how she has been and how she wants to be shaped by her experiences. This invited her to speak with self-compassion and an appreciation for what she has been through and how she has managed. This helped her to shift her thoughts about the event, particularly the thoughts of self-blame, towards new possibilities of self-compassion, pride and triumph. I observed this interaction as being a significant moment of client agency, where Chloe chose how she wants to be affected and shaped by the event, rather than this being out of her control and dictated by the societal expectations of how people may be affected after a death of a significant person in their life. By asking solution-focused questions that place the client in the driver's seat of how they construct their experiences, this encourages her agency by choosing how she wants things to be for herself and invites new possibilities to be described through the future focus. This invites a new narrative to be described for herself, beyond the problem (Walter & Peller, 1996). This interaction is also based on the solution-focused assumption that clients have goals that they can reach through using their own resources and unique process to achieve these goals (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). I have not used scaling before in this way before and adapted it to suit the goals of the client. This demonstrated a co-constructed therapeutic process of working towards client goals in unique and client-led ways.

Chapter Two: Connection to Others

Chloe wanted to work towards sharing with others what has happened in her life and how she feels about it, in order to shift her coping strategy of bottling up how she is feeling. She has noticed that this ends in the bottle breaking, which has become unhelpful for her. Solution-focused questioning involves amplification of client goals and exploring what will be happening in the clients' preferred future where those goals are happening (Hanton, 2011). To amplify Chloe's goal, I asked:

What difference would it make for you if you were able to tell people about

what's been going on for you?

I guess it would be easier for them to kind of understand and be able to support me.

It would make it feel easier. I feel like sometimes my friends struggle cos they don't

know what it's like and they don't really know what happened. They just know who

died, but they don't really know the details and like how I have reacted.

Questions that elicit what will be different when the goal is happening are asked with the aim of changing the clients present reality. This also constructs the client's sense of agency and hope as they hear themselves speak about when things will be better (Hanton, 2011).

To explore who the people are she is wanting to talk to, we did a relationship mapping activity to identify key support people she has in her life. This co-constructed process helped Chloe to shape her goals in more defined and meaningful ways by identifying who she wants to tell and describing the important traits she would want in her support people. This interaction occurred as Chloe wrote the names of the people on a piece of paper and then drew different length lines to indicate how close they were to her. I would include a picture of the relationship map she drew, however I cannot in order to protect the anonymity of the names she had written down. The conversation went as follows:

With telling people about your feelings, who would be the people? We could

draw around you the people who are close to you, and the people who are a

few layers out, so we can see who the key support people are that you have in

your life at the moment.

She spent a few minutes quietly reflecting on this and writing people's names down from the different contexts in her life such as friends at school, outside of school, people at work, school and family members. She then identified the following key support people she has:

> *My friend Tara, and my aunt, they would be the closest people to me.*
>
> ***Who are the ones you would say are the main people you would want to talk to? Maybe you could circle them?***
>
> *I would like to talk to Sarah because she has also gone through something similar with losing her mum and would understand. My friend Tara cos she is helpful. And Callum, cos he is a positive person and gives me motivational talks. He is easy to talk to and always there when I need him.*
>
> ***What would be some key traits that are important for you in the people you are wanting to talk to?***
>
> *I guess having that closeness, and like, knowing that we are there for each other, I guess. Like a mutual understanding of knowing that we support each other, and this goes back and forth.*

I observed this as being a significant moment for Chloe and she confirmed this at the end of the session when I asked what has been helpful for her. The interaction went as follows:

> **What is something that has stood out to you from today?**
>
> I guess realising who I have and why I have them.

The solution-focused approach aims to include the wider systems that people belong to. Chloe has recognised this for herself, which is why she expressed that as a goal. However, as we spoke, I noticed how Chloe's response to the above question aligns with the suggestion from De Jong and Berg (2013) which outlines that it is important to consider others in the context of developing solutions. This is because people who form the

significant relational contexts around the client are witnesses to their change and since people are not an island, the changes the client makes will have an impact on those around them too (Hanton, 2011). Furthermore, by asking relationship questions through the solution-focused approach, this also acknowledges that change is not a solo act and instead, is a joint or collective endeavour (Davis & Osborn, 2000). As Chloe spoke about who she wanted to tell and why, this shaped her understanding of what is important to her in her support people, so she can choose who she tells and why. This enhanced her agency and ownership over this process.

Throughout our time working together between sessions, Chloe had started to share more openly with her friend Callum about her experiences and how she feels. She described Callum in a previous session as positive, motivational, easy to talk to and there when she needs him. She also identified Callum as someone she would like to share with, which she then went on to do. Through sharing with him, a person who she feels supported by, she felt safe and was open to hearing his perspective. She shared about how this conversation with Callum was experienced by her:

> **So, in terms of looking forward to the future, you're not wanting that to have so many triggers of the past?**
>
> *Yeah when I was talking to my friend Callum about it this week, he was pushing the idea that you gotta look at the positives, not just the negatives.*
>
> **How does that resonate with you?**
>
> *I like that he is trying to help. We haven't been friends for long, so he doesn't really know the full story, but he has provided another view on things.*
>
> **What difference has it made for you, having someone shine a light on a different perspective?**
>
> *I guess, whenever I remember what he said, it makes me think about the good things that have come out of it. Like a proper safe place where there is always power,*

always food, always shelter, and family members who show they care, not just go off

and leave me at the bar.

What is it like for you going back to that time and looking at it with a positive

lens on it all?

It makes me feel safer and more part of a family. With mum leaving me at the bar

with her older friends, I felt disengaged from it all. With the people I live with now, I

feel more a part of a family, and I feel more safe.

What are some other things you are feeling more settled about?

I guess the ways school is going. Even though I didn't feel like I was struggling

before it all happened, I realised that I was. When we found out that I've got learning

difficulties, we kind of realised that's why I was struggling back then, and I was really

far behind back then. Now that I'm able to get that help, I'm able to do more, and

focus more.

The conversations that Chloe was starting to have, were opening her up to hearing different

perspectives. I was conscious to ask, *"How does that resonate with you?"* because I wanted

to be sure that she was able to have a choice over what opinions she listened to when

others would speak to her about her life experiences. In this case, Chloe found Callum's

perspective helpful as it started to shift her view on what has changed in her life as a result

of the death of her mum. She was sharing about how she now felt safe, part of a family and

was able to get help, do more and focus more. This process was about ensuring that Chloe

had choice over the situation. This is her story to tell and she wants to tell it, but with people

who she feels supported by so that they can understand her better and more fully. By her

exploring who she wanted to tell and why, she was then able to go and do that. The role that

Callum played in how she made meaning of her experiences helped her to see how things

have changed and how aspects of that change have been positive for her. By exploring how

others can become part of the process of solution-building for Chloe, this supported her to

become more open and honest with people, but at the same time it started a more internal

process of reflection for her, which helped her to see her experience in new ways that were meaningful to her. In all of my questioning around this, I kept the focus on Chloe and how things were for her, so that she could get a sense of control in the situation and have ownership over her experience of sharing with others. This aligns with the solution-focused approach of focusing on the client (De Jong & Berg, 2013). My intention in doing this was for Chloe to generate understanding of the role she has in choosing how she makes meaning from what others say, as she languages her experiences by opening up to them.

Chapter Three: Connection to Future

Eliciting the client's preferred future and moving towards this is a key component of the solution-focused approach. This is based on the assumption that everyone has a preferred future and this is more helpful to focus on in the process of change as opposed to managing and moving away from the problem (Hanton, 2011). The difference here is that change in the solution-focused approach is defined by the solution, not the problem (Hanton, 2011). Scaling is a solution-focused tool which is used to help a client move towards their preferred future, rather than away from where they don't want to be. This is an essential shift in thinking that defines the solution-focused approach (Hanton, 2011). Scaling provided the most significant discussions about Chloe's preferred future and the shifts she made occurred most noticeably when she was describing what a 10 would be like for her, when things are the best. The following interaction occurred when we were discussing her goals of exploring how she would express and manage her emotions:

> *Ok, let's do this scale on the whiteboard. What would be the title or heading for what we are going to do?*
>
> *Project emotions!*

I will do a scale with a 10, which is the absolute best, and a 1 which is the opposite. If you were able to do exactly what you are wanting to do with this, what would it be like?

I would be able to stop myself from getting caught up in the thoughts and the sadness.

What would you be doing instead?

I'd just be happier and enjoying everything. I wouldn't feel like closing myself off. Instead, I'd be open and wanting to talk about things.

To make that really detailed, you would want to be talking about things...what would that be?

If I met someone and they were interested in wanting to know what happened, then I'd actually be able to tell them.

What would be the detail that you would be wanting to share? What would be your ideal range of openness?

I guess, when it happened, what the cause of it was and then the good things that came out of it. I wouldn't describe everything that happened that night, that's a bit over the top.

What would be the reason for wanting to keep those things to yourself?

That's details that they don't need to know cos it's like, personal.

That's helpful for you to know what openness is on this topic and giving yourself permission to keep things to yourself, as you have full rights to not have to share something with someone you don't want to. Who are the ideal people that you'd want to share this with?

If I have kids and they wonder why they don't have grandma. My partner, close friends who I feel like I can talk to about it.

Let's say project emotions has hit a 10, what kind of breakthroughs or changes would you be hoping for within yourself?

I'd be able to talk about it without getting upset. It would get me thinking, I guess, if I was older, it would get me thinking about how far I've come since then and what I've accomplished.

In terms of this appreciation and recognition of all that has gone on, what difference do you think that would make for yourself?

I will feel proud of myself and happy that I worked on it.

What would be making you feel happy?

I guess because when it first happened, I didn't think I'd get back from it and I wouldn't be the same. But if I am able to achieve all this, I would feel like "yes it affected me but I'm still part of my old self". It would have proven that it is possible to get back from the pain, to who I am. I guess also feeling proud that I haven't given up.

What stands out to you the most looking at the 10?

The part about what I'd tell people if they wanted to know.

What do you think it is that is making that stand out?

I'm kind of surprised I'm willing to say that much. I've never really said those things out loud before.

By co-constructing Chloe's preferred future, she noticed her strength, perseverance and resilience through what she has been able to get through and what she is willing to challenge herself to do in order to reach the hopes she has for her life. Future oriented questions are powerful tools for grief work because they can help the clients think about possibilities where things could be better (Butler & Powers, 1996). Furthermore, imagining a preferred future can free clients from a hopeless perspective and their descriptions of this help to make new meanings of what their future could look like, which supports their agency as they are in control of what those descriptions are (Butler & Powers, 1996). I had hoped to co-construct a detailed picture of Chloe's preferred future happening so that she could visualise it and imagine it happening as a real possibility. During this conversation, I asked

what her ideal range of openness was in regard to the details she would be wanting to share with someone. I asked this question because I wanted to convey to Chloe that she can be in control of her story and what she shares about it. To enhance this recognition, I also asked why she would want to keep certain things to herself. I asked this question with the intention of inviting Chloe to express her reasons for keeping parts of her story to herself. Through what she expressed during this conversation, I had hoped that this would enable her to give herself permission to share within ranges of openness that are appropriate for her, so that she is in control of what she is willing to share with others on this topic.

In a later session when we scaled her past, present and future self, she was able to describe what she would be hoping for her in the preferred future identity. This was an adaptation to scaling which evolved through the co-construction of our counselling session.

> **What do you want your future self to look like?**
> *All the feelings of blame gone.*
> **All the blame gone, what would be there instead?**
> *Proudness. Happiness. Still feeling supported by people if I needed it, like my family and friends.*
> **How do you want your thoughts to be in the future as you look back and see how this experience has shaped you?**
> *Thinking about the memories and how much I've changed. Looking back and seeing how my life has gone from being down in the dumps, and it is rising and knowing that no matter what happens, it will never be that low again.*

By asking *"What would be there instead?"* my intention was to shift Chloe's description of her preferred future away from being rooted in the problem as we co-constructed a shared meaning of her hopes. This is a solution-focused tool which seeks to intrinsically motivate and engage a client beyond their problems. This offers a source of hope as client's describe

what they would like to be happening in their life instead and the counsellor helping them to further describe this. For Chloe, she languaged her hopes, free from the blame. She was also able to hear herself speak powerful words about how she had coped and the hope she has as a result of her evolving experiences of progress and her increased belief in herself. These questions invited Chloe to have agency over how she thinks about the event, free from feelings of blame and instead, feel proud of herself. This makes her an active participant in the process of healing from the death of her mum, as opposed to this event having control over her and her future.

Chapter Four: Connection to What Helps

Solution-focused therapists place an emphasis on what is working for the clients and believe that they have skills, strengths and resources that they have used before and can use again to cope (Hanton, 2011). I believed that Chloe had experienced a significant trauma from what she had shared. However, I saw her as a capable, resilient and strong person. This led me to wonder how she had managed to cope so well which was a curiosity that led us to having the following conversation. We did this by exploring her instances of success through what is already working for her. My intention in asking about this was for her to recognise her current resources and strategies, and then amplify the positive outcomes that come from her use of them through asking *"What difference does this make for you?"* This is to build a story of what works for her and why, in rich and specific detail so that it is meaningful and useful for her.

> ***What have you done already that has been helpful for you?***
> *I am now noticing how I am feeling a lot more which is good. I've also found ways to kind of like, distract myself. Like, putting my headphones in and listening to music. That blocks out the thoughts, but then it also helps me understand what I'm thinking*

about. I also go outside and go for a walk. I've started walking to school and then back home again and I've found that helps.

Wow you have lots of strategies! What difference does this make for you?

Walking gives me a different environment. It does get me out of the comfort of the house, but it also means I can get be by myself and process my thoughts. It also means I don't have to worry about being interrupted or distracted. It's about an hour a day, half an hour each way I get to do this.

This process helped us to collaborate on what is helpful for Chloe to reach her goal of managing her thoughts. However, instead of coming up with new ideas, this was like detective work that sought to find what was already working for Chloe, that she might consider continuing to do. This interaction happened in our first session together, however we also explored the helpful strategies that she has used in the past through scaling in a later session. This gave her another opportunity to express and shape what helps her to manage her thoughts. This occurred as she described where she had been on the scale in the past, which was a 3, and where she was at now, which was a 6. This helps to validate the clients' experiences and description of the situation in the past present and future, while also enquiring into what has helped them to move up the scale, to bring coping skills, resources and strengths into focus.

How did you manage to move up the scale from a 3 to a 6?

I have found more distractions.

What are the helpful distractions for you?

Doing school work, being at home, using my headphones, food, watching movies. Sometimes I've written it down on paper, like how I was feeling and writing letters to mum. I tried to turn the sad memories into happy and fun ones. And remembering that even though she isn't here physically, she is still here with me. And then having like, positive people around has helped along the way as well.

Who are those people?

My friends, my cat and the kids at work. They are always so positive and energetic. And then talking to people as well has given me a more positive side to look at it from. People who are just there when I need someone to talk to.

For us at the moment, a helpful way for us to wrap this up might be ways that can help shift you up the scale slightly. Where do you want to be the next time I see you?

I want to be at an 8.

From looking up here with what helps, what would help you out in this journey from 6 to 8? You can also circle what we have written up on the whiteboard already or add some new ones too.

I guess talking about it more and being open. I have been starting to talk about it with my friend Callum. Continuing to have space when needed also helps and I guess just knowing when I've had a good day and shifting the sad to happy thoughts. I feel like I know how to manage the thoughts now and remembering who I am as well helps me to do that.

Wow, how has that been for you?

The proudness is there, and perseverance is also there, cos I didn't give up.

The question *"How did you manage?"* that I asked at the beginning of the transcript is an example of an indirect compliment within the solution-focused approach. It is a question that leads to the client being able to express their own strengths and resources (De Jong & Berg, 2013). Additionally, through goal-oriented scaling (Hanton, 2011), we were able to identify strategies that have been helpful for Chloe in the past which shaped her knowledge of possible strategies that she could use to move further up the scale towards her preferred future. We did this in a collaborative way by both writing up on the whiteboard and walking around and talking as we did it. From our first session together, Chloe identified what will be helpful for her, which was to talk to her friend Callum. She had put this into action by the

time we had our second session together. The changes that she had noticed in herself as a result of doing what is helpful to her, was that she is now able to manage her thoughts and remembering who she is supports her to do that. As she described what is helpful to her in rich and specific detail, she was able to language a story of strength and coping that is meaningful for her. I observed her to be actively involved in her own change process of managing her thoughts associated with the death of her mum. I also noticed her sense of agency and control over how she applied this new knowledge and meaning in her life through describing what is helpful for her.

Chapter Five: Connection to the Counselling Process

As part of the solution-focused approach, it is common practice to ask clients about the usefulness of the session (Hanton, 2011). It is important to be doing more of what is working for the client and a question such as *"What has been helpful for you today?"* invites a conversation around this. It also acknowledges that Chloe is the expert on her experiences, rather than me as the counsellor relying on my own assumptions about what was helpful in the session for her. It also invites a collaborative discussion about what has worked for the client and what they might want to be different in our future sessions so that it is more useful for them. The following conversation occurred at the end of our first session together as we reflected on what was helpful for Chloe:

> **What has been helpful for you today?**
> *Writing it all down, it's way easier! I enjoy seeing things on paper. Visualising it helps. Cos, I feel when I see it in front of me, I can get the words out.*
> **What particular conversations have been helpful along the way for you?**

Being asked how I managed and what I use to distract myself. And talking about the scenarios first, and then talking about how it affected me, and what I want out of it. Like futuristic talk.

What could we do differently next time so that it is more useful for you?

It would be better if we used the whiteboard to write things down!

In our first session we were writing things down on paper as we sat around a table. However, Chloe identified the use of the whiteboard is helpful for her as she can visualise what we are talking about. This was something she identified at the end of our first session, and she continued to want to use the whiteboard in our subsequent sessions. The whiteboard facilitated a collaborative process for Chloe to externalise her thoughts, while then being able to sit back and reflect on what she had shared. As she read back what was written on the board, she could hear her success and strengths in her own words. When it came to us co-constructing the steps forward, we used the whiteboard for Chloe to circle what she wanted to do and then she added some new ideas herself as well. It became an evolving piece of our work together. By recording the solutions on the whiteboard as they emerge, they are visible to both the client and the counsellor which is both encouraging and reinforcing (Shennan, 2014)**.** Furthermore, what is drawn and written on the whiteboard is not fixed and can be changed or added to, which Chloe was actively involved in. I observed this as Chloe implicitly understanding that this was a co-constructed process where we could both collaborate and contribute to it. At the end of the sessions Chloe would take a picture of what we had done on the whiteboard as a personal take away from the session. Through our sessions she shaped a new story for her life in meaningful ways and these pictures of the whiteboard were able to be taken home for her to continue to reflect on, to further support her to work towards her goals.

Further questions that I asked at the end of our sessions working together invited Chloe to describe how the counselling experience was for her. Her responses informed my

understanding of the usefulness of talking out loud with someone, as the co-constructed conversations help to shape her belief in herself. They also helped to create new stories for how she wants her life to be, and how she now believes it can be.

What has been useful for you from our work together?

I feel like I can actually do it now!

That's awesome! How did this process help you believe in yourself?

I guess by getting me to talk about things, and showing me that I actually can open up, and don't have to bottle up.

How has your belief in yourself changed?

It made me realise that I can do it. I don't hide or blame myself anymore like I used to. I believe that I can do things now and into my future without letting my past affect it.

What else has stood out to you from today?

I am surprised I said all that, cos that's the most I've said in a while.

What was that like?

It kind of felt good to get it out. It has got rid of the nervousness and shown me that I can do it. The proudness is there now.

The sense of agency that Chloe experienced over how she wanted her life to be was more evident within our sessions, as opposed to between sessions with what changes she put into action. This was because the work that we were doing was more focused on the past and how she framed that up in her mind, towards having a new way of how she viewed herself as a result of the experiences she has been through. This then helped us to look forward to what she wants her future to look like and what will help her to get there. The process that we went through in our counselling sessions shifted her confidence within herself about managing her thoughts and sharing with people about how she feels, rather than bottling this up. She got to the point where she was able to believe that *"I can do it!"* even though it is

difficult. It appeared as though her sense of agency was increased through feeling free from blaming thoughts and seeing that her future can be shaped by her experiences, rather than being defined or held back by them. The work she did between our sessions was also powerful for her, with starting to share with her friend Callum about her experiences and recognising what is helpful for her already and doing more of that, to support her in the process of making changes towards her preferred future.

Chapter Six: Connection to Agency Outcomes

Chloe went through a process of making meaning for herself from the trauma that she had experienced in her childhood and how she wants to move forward with this, recognising what is helpful for her as she moves towards her preferred future. She was hiding herself from others and pretending to be happy for their benefit. This meant that she did not share how she was feeling about a significant event that happened in her childhood with the death of her mum and how this affected her in the present too. She was also stuck with feelings of blame, responsibility and guilt over the *"what if?"* questions that she was having about what she thinks she could have done to prevent her mum's death. Throughout the counselling process, Chloe storied her identity in ways that aligned more closely to her preferred future and as a result, she described that she was now *"one person in one body"* as opposed to having different parts of herself showing in different contexts of her life. This facilitated a collaborative process of languaging her identity with rich descriptions that helped to shape who she is and who she wanted to become. Chloe also felt proud of herself, because she *"persevered"* and didn't let her life *"be ruined"* by the experience. Through exception finding, describing instances of success and what is already working, this invited Chloe to share about her strengths, resources and skills. As she described what she had been able to do despite her difficulties, she showed herself self-compassion and recognised how well she has coped. She noticed that she felt proud of herself for this, as well as how she has been

shaped by the experience, through noticing how her preferred identity is already happening in her life. The meaning she constructed from these conversations had an interconnectedness of feeling proud of herself as well as believing that she is continuing to make her mum proud too. She described that the process of working towards her goals since her mum died has been difficult although she was patient with herself, as she expressed that it will continue to be difficult as she progresses through different stages of her life which will bring up new challenges. However, she now believes that she can do it through knowing what is helpful for her. As we co-constructed what she wanted to do to move towards her goals and preferred future, she was then able to start that process, which initiated her active participation and sense of personal agency. Her experiences of losing her mum are outside of her control and are significant. However, this process of working towards her hopes for her future, gave her the chance to be in control of that new process of storying her life, which I observed as being a freeing experience for her. She described meaningful changes within herself as a result of counselling, which was the most significant change she made throughout us working together. These internal changes then motivated her to put her goals of talking to others and managing her thoughts into action between sessions, which further increased her desire for change. This is because her experiences of applying these actions into her life had been helpful and positive for her, which she noticed through describing the changes she had seen within herself as a result. For example, feeling like she can do it through putting her hopes into action and seeing that she is capable and can manage, which inspired further action.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Findings: Millie's Story

Character Introduction: Millie

Millie is a 15-year-old, New Zealand European, female high school student. She is a creative, driven and independent person with a quirky and humorous personality. She has experienced bullying in the past and as a result, feels like that has shaped how she views herself and how she fits in with others. She cares a lot for others, but recognises that she finds it difficult to care for herself. She is in a position in her family where she provides a lot of support for others and as a result, feels a lot of responsibility to care for other people. This causes stress when balancing her personal difficulties with caring for others, as she prioritises this over caring for herself and attending to her own personal challenges.

Synopsis of the Counselling Process

Millie described that she has a lot going on in her life and as a result, found it difficult to identify what it was that she wanted to work on as there was *"just so much".* We untangled this stuck feeling to identify that she was experiencing stress due to a number of factors. First was her feeling of acceptance and social connection. At school, she has not felt a strong sense of social connection, so as a result this has impacted how she feels about herself. She is moving to a different school next year where she has begun to connect with people through a mutual friend. This is a group of people she feels a developing sense of acceptance and connection with. We explored what is happening when she is with this group, the difference this makes for her and how she wants things to be moving forward next year at the new school with them. This highlighted her strengths in managing to develop and

maintain these relationships. Throughout these discussions, stress still played a significant part in her life, so we described what helps her to manage stress. She identified that riding her bike is helpful and as a result, she began bike riding around the park in the evenings which shifted her mindset towards being calmer, through being connected to nature and more imaginative thinking. From this point, she was able to make plans for her to address the current stressors of exams by making a timetable for her to achieve her goals of studying and caring for herself by biking and spending time with friends and family. To address the difficulties that she was having within herself, we scaled what a 10 would be like for her and how she wants to progress towards her preferred future of viewing and caring for herself in a more helpful way. This brought up a renewed sense of optimism towards herself and her future which she recognised in how positive she felt about the sessions.

Chapters of Millie's Story

Chapter One: Connection to Self

Throughout Millie's time at school, she has experienced bullying. She shared that the way she views herself has been influenced by how others have spoken and behaved towards her. The voices that others have had about her have informed Millie's view of herself. This made it difficult for Millie to see new possibilities beyond these experiences for how she constructs her identity in ways that are shaped by her own voice. We worked to co-construct a story about herself from her own voice and perspective about who she is, who she wants to be and what is important to her. This conversation invited Millie to have agency over her notion of self that involves a process of personal meaning making. However, it also acknowledges the external social factors and constraints that are involved in this process (Layder, 2007). Millie noticed that her strengths were in how she cared for others, so I had attempted to facilitate discussions that storied how Millie could prioritise caring for herself, as

she does this so well for others. Our conversations involved a re-storying of how Millie views herself. This involved having agency over being the storyteller, where she was invited to describe who she is and what it would be like to believe in herself, to like herself more and to prioritise caring for herself. These goals appeared to be a significant part of her process of meaning making for how she viewed herself in a new way, which then positively influenced her relationships with others. This was because as she described her belief in her self-worth and value, she then believed that she was deserving of people's friendships. I observed the interplay of self and others in these conversations, as Layder (2007) suggests in the process of co-constructing the notion of self through social constructionism, which underpins the solution-focused approach. The following transcript captures a part of this process:

What else would help you to believe in yourself?

I don't know cos it's not really ever been my strong suit. I want to back myself now, and be able to say, "I can do this." I'm just trying to focus on looking after myself more. I've realised I care so much about others and I feel so responsible for them. But I've realised my number one priority should be me. If I am happy, surely that will transfer into a ripple effect.

What difference would this make for you?

Well I'd probably get some more self-confidence. I just want to feel content and have general positivity with lots of laughs. I'm just quite down on myself right now and it's quite tiring, so I'd definitely want to change that. I just feel that I'm useless because people tend to discard me a lot which makes me feel like a second option, which kind of sucks.

What thoughts would you be having towards yourself instead?

Just that I'm not as irritating as I think I am. I always worry that if I don't cling to this person, they are gonna leave me. But at the same time, if I cling to this person too much, they will leave me. I'd like to like myself more and feel more secure and like myself in my relationships.

Would you say that's a goal for you?

Yeah!

What does being yourself look like for you?

I notice that I have different personas for different things. So, at school, I'm quiet and have my headphones in, trying to work. At home I am loud, trying to be funny and hard working. With my friends I can just be myself.

The question, *"What thoughts would you be having towards yourself instead?"* invited Millie to consider new possibilities, which frames up a preferred future that is about the *"presence or start of something, rather than the absence or end of something"* (Bateman & Milner, 2011, p. 49). The use of the word 'instead' assumes that change is desired and invites a description of these hopes that are free from the problem. Agency and hope are also enhanced as the client is able to describe how they want their preferred future to be and in this case, Millie's preferred identity, through inviting her to consider what she wants her thoughts about herself to be instead.

There were challenges in Millie describing her view of herself in ways that were kind. Throughout our sessions, Millie would respond with phrases such as, *"I don't know"* or *"I can't"* when we would discuss what it would be like to make herself a priority, or to care for herself like she cares for others. To try to support Millie to speak more freely, without the constraints of her social experiences having such a power over her story of her identity, we used strengths cards. I invited her to do this as a way for her to simply look at the cards and hopefully, this would encourage her to consider how they might resonate with her, to then support her to re-story herself in ways that capture her strengths and skills. This aligns with the solution-focused approach which views clients as capable and having skills, strengths and resources (Hanton, 2011).

What are some strengths that you notice you have had in the challenges you have gone through? I'm going to pull out some cards for us to use for this. Have a look and see what stands out for you as strengths that you notice in yourself.

The thing is, I'm not that good of a person.

That's the thing, this is going to challenge you to see beyond those concrete thoughts which can be hard to see beyond sometimes.

(Millie then spent some time looking at the cards and choosing them)

Do you want to read to me what you have chosen?

Yeah, the first one I chose is attentive.

How do you show that you are attentive?

People come to me with their problems a lot, so I listen to them and help them. I think I'm also quite humorous.

How do you use your humour?

I think it's a coping mechanism.

Is it one that works?

A little! It helps me cope. Like, when other people are upset, I try to crack some jokes which make people laugh. I like doing that. I chose adventurous too because whenever my friends and I get together we go and do fun things.

What are some positive things that come from being adventurous?

We get a lot of cool photos and we have good memories!

Does it shift some of those thoughts you often have about yourself?

I don't get any of those thoughts when I am with my friend doing adventurous things. When I am like that, I just let people know that I love them, and they are loved, and like when they are having a rough time, I just try to show them as much love as possible. So, I guess I am quite loving too.

What comes from that? Do you see a difference in them?

95

Yeah, they seem to get more positive. Another thing I like to do is make my friends personalised birthday cards. I think that is quite loving. I'm also quite generous.

How do you use generosity?

I try to give people the things I never had. I try to give people as much love and attention as possible. I try to give more than I take with moral support and stuff.

You are really thinking about others a lot in how you use your strengths.

I guess I just don't want people to feel the way I feel about myself.

How could you be loving towards yourself?

I don't know. This is hard. I've been told I'm crap for such a long time, so it's hard to see beyond it and sort of believe it. I used to get bullied a lot. I was the weird kid with the headphones. From being bullied, not a day goes past that I don't think about it.

Other people's voices have had a big impact on you. Now you are finding your own voice for how you want to see yourself to overpower or challenge the other voices, to push how you see yourself in a new direction.

The way you are with others, what would happen if you were this way towards yourself?

I just can't. I can't even imagine being nice to myself. I don't deserve niceness, I just think, what have I done to deserve that?

The strengths cards supported Millie to identify strengths that she has, and throughout our conversation, she spoke in detail about how she used them in her relationships with others. I had hoped that this process might invite Millie to provide the rich descriptions of ways that she sees these strengths within herself, however these were limited. I observed that we had reached a point where we were both stuck, both finding it difficult to consider how Millie might look after herself and see beyond the view of herself that is rooted in the problems she had described. I then decided to use the whiteboard to further externalise the ways that Millie was speaking about herself in ways that were kind, and emphasised her strengths. This provided Millie with the increased freedom of expression as she spoke with more rich

descriptions about herself and with more specific goals for how she might care for herself. The use of the whiteboard appeared to further disinhibit the barriers that Millie had expressed which hold her back from sharing positive and kind descriptions of herself. The following conversation captures this shift in Millie's openness to this process:

> ***Ok, let's try something different. Have a look at what we have written down on the whiteboard and circle or write down the things that are showing you are loving and caring for yourself?***
>
> *Having stable relationships and working towards having this. I feel like I'd be more calm within myself too and then be more positive towards myself. I'd also like to set up my room so that it is a calm and relaxing space to be in.*
>
> ***If you were able to feel more calm and positive within yourself, what kind of things would you be doing?***
>
> *I'd probably be doing a lot more meditation practices and journaling.*
>
> ***What kind of things come from meditation and journaling for you?***
>
> *It is like 5 minutes where I can just let go, have time to think, process things and destress. I can also just reflect and understand my thoughts better.*

Although this was a goal that Millie described for herself, the process of exploring what Millie would be doing when she is caring for herself was a challenging one. I observed an interplay of determination, engagement and resistance from Millie when we discussed shifting the ways that she viewed herself towards new possibilities. This had me wondering about how powerful the voices of others can be in how we construct our view of ourselves, as Layder (2007) suggests. To address this, we gently worked to add layers of rich and specific description for Millie to story her preferred identify of who she is, what is important to her and how she cares for herself, to work towards her goal of liking herself more. I observed how Millie became more comfortable as we progressed through different approaches of externalisation. For example, we began with verbal descriptions, to then strengths cards,

and then using the whiteboard. At the end of the session, when I asked what was helpful for Millie, she said:

> *"I actually noticed that as I looked at the strengths cards, and I read those positive words, it kind of ignited a spark within me. It was encouraging seeing them and being reminded of the good parts of myself, and then thinking about how I use them in my life."*

I was surprised by this comment about the strengths cards, however it highlighted to me that there was an internal process of reflection occurring for Millie. Through this process, she was making meaning for herself about how she sees these strengths as part of her identity, how she connects with others and uses them in her life. Although Millie found it difficult at this time to express these thoughts outwardly, there was a more internal reflection occurring for her that she found meaningful as it supported her to see herself in ways that gave shape to her identity of having strengths. Throughout this process of internal reflection and externalisation, Millie became more comfortable with languaging herself in positive ways. As a result, she was able to describe specific ways that she would be caring for herself, such as doing meditation and journaling *"to let go, have time to think, process things and destress*."

Chapter Two: Connection to Others

When I met with Millie for the first time, she described to me that she felt like a burden to everyone and that she let people down with who she is, her personality and how she thinks. This was what she described in our first session, which was very focused around the problem. To shift the conversation to a more solution-focused place, we then described exceptions and instances of success that are already happening in her life, in her

relationships. This supported Millie in her movement towards her preferred future, through noticing what is working, while also not minimising her concerns (Bateman & Milner, 2011).

Have there been times in your life where you felt like you have fitted in?

Yes! With my friends at a different school!

What is it like in that friendship group?

It's great! They are people who can genuinely make me smile.

How do they do that?

They are hilarious, we have lots of banter. They are just really accepting, nice and sweet. I feel accepted.

What do you see more of in those relationships?

I am a ball of energy. But then also, I am chill but energetic. I crack more jokes and they actually laugh which is so great. And in general, the mood is just so much better. We all respect and listen to each other when we talk. I really enjoy being there with them.

How else do you feel in those relationships?

Loved, they make me feel happy.

What changes do you notice in yourself when you are around them?

I can just be myself. It's always a plus.

It sounds like this has highlighted what is important to you?

Yeah, it has.

Exceptions to the problem, and instances of success that are already happening in a client's life are solution-focused tools that invite problem-free talk for more solution-building descriptions (Hanton, 2011; Shennan, 2014). This question rapidly shifted Millie's focus to a group of friends she is developing her relationships with. As she spoke about them, I observed a significant boost in her demeanour, particularly through her more upright and expressive body language, her big smile and uplifted, energetic tone. From Millie describing

to me earlier on in the sessions that she has never felt like she has fitted in, feels discarded a lot, is irritating to others and not that good of a person, I observed this interaction to be a significant shift for Millie. This moved our conversation in a more positive direction in terms of how she described herself more positively when in connection to others who she feels supported by and can be herself with. This conversation opened up rich descriptions through the use of exception finding questions and then amplifying them. It appeared to be an effective way of shifting the sources of evidence she was using to back up her negative views of herself towards a more hopeful place. Part of the solution-focused process is for clients to look for what is working and what will work for them, which encouraged Millie to acknowledge this for herself and invited her to give self-praise through what difference she noticed in herself as a result of amplifying these instances of success (Hanton, 2011).

I then went on to ask a relationship question (De Jong & Berg, 2013), to enquire about what she thinks her friends would have noticed about herself when the exception was happening. This example of a relationship question invited Millie to externalise the instances of success that others might have witnessed when Millie is being herself with them (Hanton, 2011). My intention for doing this was to invite Millie to describe this in rich detail for herself, to add power to the story of her preferred identity in her relationships with others.

What would your friends notice when you are being yourself?

I am more relaxed, more assertive, not as timid. I am normally quite shy and I like to stay in the shadows a little bit. But when I am being myself, I just don't care and I am able to really take control of myself. So I think my friends would notice that I was more talkative, laughing more and just generally more wide-eyed and energetic.

What are some more things that are important for you in your relationships?

Trust. It is important that people trust me as much as I can trust them. It makes me feel truthful cos if there is a problem, we can just say it. Honesty is important. I try to

care about people's feelings and stuff cos I know what it is like to feel alone. So I want to be there for people so they don't feel alone.

It sounds like your experiences have refined and shaped what is important to you in your relationships.

Through enquiring about instance of success in Millie's relationships when things are already working well and by amplifying this through the use of relationship questions, this invited Millie to provide descriptions of what is happening when she is more like herself in her relationships and what is important to her in her relationships with others. Furthermore, this question implies that there has been movement already towards Millie's preferred future and this question aims to build on what others might notice when this happens, which helps to amplify it (Hanton, 2011). This supported Millie to story her preferred identity through noticing what is already working well for her. These descriptions supported her to confidently identify the people she wants to invest in further when she goes to her new school next year and what difference this would make for her. These conversations facilitated a solution-focused process of Millie storying her life and relationships in ways that gives shape and meaning to them, so that her they are more aligned with her hopes for her preferred identity and future.

Millie had some concerns about going to her new school because there was a person there who she had some difficulties with in the past, which were currently unresolved. She was worried about seeing them at school for the first time and this being an uncomfortable experience. After our first session, Millie decided to meet up and talk with this person. She came back to our second session and told me about this experience. Through managing this challenge of an unresolved relationship, Millie was able to describe her preferred future of going to her new school in richer and more hopeful language. I observed a noticeable shift in how she spoke after having had this conversation. She spoke in a clear, direct and confident way.

So, it's been a good day overall?

Yeah, it's been good! Something happened on Tuesday and since then, my life has been so much better!

What was this amazing moment?

I talked to the person I told you last week I was having trouble with. We ended up having an argument, we got everything off our chests and we have decided not to continue our relationship. Now I feel so happy and free!

Wow, how has the happiness and freedom come into the picture here?

I finally realised how manipulative he has been towards me!

It sounds as though as difficult as it was, you got a lot of clarity?

YES! Yes, yes! My life is so much easier now!

How has it made things better having that clarity?

I can talk to whoever I want now at my new school without having to worry that he will get upset. I can just enjoy my time there and have a laugh with my friends. It's so freeing!

An argument could have had a really different outcome, but you have found it really freeing. How did you manage that?

I was pretty upset the day that it happened, but then the next day I woke up feeling so much better. I went to sleep and then I woke up feeling lighter. It's given me the ability to have a good time and not focus on him. I now realise that I wanna go forward without him being a part of that and that's making me feel better about it. I don't need his validation and by having that argument, it felt like I got broken out of a spell.

Through taking a brave step to manage the challenges she was having with this person, this enabled her to have more an increased sense of agency as she moved forward with this relationship next year. She initially described that she felt held back and afraid, wondering

what might happen when they saw each other at school next year. However, as she put her goal from our first session of having a conversation with this person into action, this placed her in the driver's seat for how she wanted this relationship to be. She was able to take control of this situation through exercising her agency and then being able to enjoy the freedom that came from doing that.

Chapter Three: Connection to Future

In our conversations that had a future focus, this was where Millie could story her life in ways that were based on her future hopes, free from her current difficulties (Hanton, 2011; Murphy, 1996). She is moving schools next year and has a lot of hope for change associated with this move. As she described the changes she was hoping for, this brought up new possibilities for herself, her relationships and the groups she wants to be involved in at school. I observed her as being motivated and determined about making her hopes happen, particularly through participating in groups and starting up new ones as well to support both herself and others in her new school community.

> *So, you are moving school next year?! What are you hoping for from that*
> *change?*
> *Happiness. I really wanna join the theatre company. But I just wanna be happy and*
> *have friends.*
> *How do you want those relationships to be when you go to your new school?*
> *Stronger, a lot stronger. I see one of them maybe once a week at the moment and I'd*
> *just really like to strengthen those relationships when we are at school together. I*
> *made friends with them through one friend, but I want to strengthen my relationships*
> *so I can get to the point where I hang out with them on my own, without my other*
> *friend having to be there who first introduced me to them.*

So, this is your chance to strengthen your relationships and establish them as your own?

Yeah, and to survive.

Ok, and what does surviving look like?

When you say that I just think of all my friends sitting together under the trees, laughing with the sun shining. That would be so good. I'm also really looking forward to starting up a biking club with my friends at my new school. At lunch times we will go biking around the park. I am so excited. And I am also going to be joining the acapella and LGBTQIA+ group.

Wow! So, you've got quite clear ideas and dreams for what next year is gonna look like?

Mm yeah and I also want to learn an instrument cos I've got a ukulele and guitar at home and I would love to learn the piano too.

We then went on to describe her future hopes in more detail. This next transcript captured the changes she was hoping to see within herself as well. Through talking about herself in her preferred future, I observed that this made is easier for her to consider the changes she hoped for, as opposed to when we talked about herself in the present moment. When we did this, Millie described herself in a more problem-focused way and found difficult to see possibilities beyond this. The miracle question is a solution-focused tool that invites a client to engage with the unlimited possibilities of their preferred future (De Jong & Berg, 2013). It invites descriptions of a preferred future that is not defined by the problem and elicits what will be happening instead (Hanton, 2011). I did not use the miracle question in its original form as guided by De Shazer (1988), and instead adapted this to suit the session with Millie. This transcript begins with my adapted and simplified miracle question to elicit a rich description of her preferred future.

Imagine life next year, you are stepping into your new school and it is exactly how you want it to be. What will that be like?

The best!

What changes will you notice in yourself?

I will definitely be a lot happier.

What else will change with the happiness?

Everything really, I will notice the good more than the bad. There will be more happy social interactions and I will actually be learning. I just think I will be more productive and will be able to focus on schoolwork. I think I will look after myself a lot more too.

When you are looking after yourself more, what will you be doing?

I will be brushing my teeth, this always feels like a big achievement to me, waking up and brushing my teeth. That makes me feel like I am being prioritised and caring for myself.

How would you be feeling in that moment?

Proud.

What else will make you proud?

Just to see my mum smile. It will be nice to see my family happy when I am happier too.

So from today, what has stood out to you?

I think I need to focus on my own happiness a lot more, and just look forward to the future.

The use of the word 'when' in solution-focused questions is a subtle shift in verb tense from the word 'if' and uses a language of expectancy. The word 'if' invites descriptions of possibilities, however, shifting to the word 'when' is significant as it supports the process of reconstructing a vision and believing that the hopeful future will happen (Parsons, 2009). Furthermore, by asking questions that begin with *"What else?"* invited Millie to describe her preferred future in rich and specific detail. This is guided by the solution-focused assumption

that the more detail that is gathered, the more likely it will be achieved (King, 2017). It also supports Millie's sense of agency as she has freedom to describe her preferred future in ways that are determined by herself.

Talking about the future were the times in our sessions when Millie spoke about herself by using her own words. In other conversations, she used words that put herself down which had been shaped by experiences she has had with others and by what they have said to her. The meaning that she generated from these experiences influenced how she viewed herself and what she believed she deserved. In the conversations with a future focus, these problem-focused comments did not come up. Instead, this process of describing Millie's preferred future in detail invited her agency and ownership over how she storied her life in ways that was shaped by her, so that it generated new meaning and possibilities for her. I observed that Millie had an increased sense of agency and control over the changes she wanted to see happen in her life.

Chapter Four: Connection to What Helps

Amidst the challenges that Millie was going through, the goals that she wanted to work towards were to manage the stress of her studies and to prioritise caring for herself. Through asking how she will manage to cope and what is helpful for her, this invited Millie to language what she will do in order to work towards those goals. This helped to shape her goals in more rich, specific and tangible detail. During these conversations in our sessions, Millie was able to come up with a range of ideas that would help her to work towards her goals of managing stress and caring for herself in the process. To invite the co-construction of a between-session task at the end of our first session, I asked Millie this question:

> ***What is one thing you want to do more of this week?***

I want to go on a bike ride.

Where would you want to go?

To the park.

A solution-focused counsellor acknowledges that most of the work is done by the client outside of the counselling room (Hanton, 2011). The question *"What is one thing you want to do more of this week?"* invited a collaborative formulation of a between-session task between Millie and myself. Millie set her own task, which emphasised her own autonomy and agency over what is helpful her. The task that she set was based on what we had discussed in our session, as we had been describing what would be helpful for her to work towards her goals, prior to me asking this question. This enabled the task to emerge as an extension of the information and interactions shared between both myself as the counsellor and Millie as the client, which is an approach that is suggested by De Jong and Berg (2013). This approach is also supported by Hanton (2011) who suggests that when a task is formulated in this way, it is shared, real and can be visited in the next session (if there is one), if it is appropriate. Often this can be done by asking the client "What's better?" in the next session, which may invite them to share about the between-session task, rather than asking directly about it (King, 2007; Hanton, 2011). This helps to avoid putting the client in a position of being obliged to do the task, or to explain why they did not (De Jong & Berg, 2013).

The next time I saw Millie, I noticed that she appeared very calm. I shared this observation with her and then asked, *"What's better?"* This invited Millie to describe what changes she noticed within herself and she reported that she had put her plan of going for a bike ride into action. The *"What's better?"* question reflects the counsellor's confidence that clients are capable and competent to take steps in the direction of what they want (De Jong & Berg, 2013). However, I did not ask specifically about the between-session task of going for a bike ride which Millie had expressed she hoped to do at the end of our last session, which was

guided by my reasoning discussed above. It then enabled Millie to express what has been helpful for her, regardless of what between-session task was discussed. This approach views Millie as the expert on her own life and leaves room for a broad range of possibilities to be discussed in regard to what has contributed to the positive changes she has experienced (De Jong & Berg, 2013).

I notice a calmness about you?

Yeah, I feel calm!

What's better?

I am finally getting myself together. I've made a timetable for the weekend so I can get work done which has helped manage my stress. Oh! And I went for a bike ride for the first time in ages after I spoke to you!

I remember you saying you wanted to go for a bike ride. What was it like?

I love biking. It gives me a chance to practice my lines for my drama exam.

So, is it a helpful way for you to study?

Yeah and I thought I only did 5 or 6 kilometres, but I did 10! I went around the park.

What kind of things do you enjoy about biking?

I like how it is exercise but you don't really think about it. It just helps me clear my mind a lot cos it is out in nature and in the fresh air.

So, does being out in nature really help you feel better?

Yeah scenery helps a lot! When I am inside, I often find myself imagining that I am sitting at a park, just thinking. It's quite peaceful. So, I find studying much easier to do now too because of that.

This experience appeared to be helpful for more reasons than Millie had initially described. This was because it had helped her work towards her goal of caring for herself by managing her stress and getting some exercise, but it also helped her to study more effectively as it helped to clear her head and gave her the chance to focus on her lines for her drama exam.

Her experience of going for a bike ride, gave her a tangible connection being outside and amongst scenery which she described is helpful for her. Since she experienced how effective it was for her, she then applied this to other times in her life, such as when she is inside studying, to gain a feeling of peace through the use of her imagination.

As we discussed in more specific detail about how she was going to manage to study for her exams, which was a significant contributor to her feelings of stress, this was where Millie described what is helpful for. We did this through scaling, which enabled her to reflect on what has worked for her in the past, to get detail around what is already working for her, which is a key solution-focused approach (Berg & Steiner, 2003). I did this in the following transcript by asking *"What's worked for you to do this throughout the year?" And "How have you managed to do this before?"* These questions help to build on the small solutions that are already happening so that they can be expanded and become bigger (Berg & Steiner, 2003). This then helped to inform Millie about what she might want to do again or do differently to manage.

> **What would be the steps for you to move up the scale slightly?**
>
> *I think I will go to tutoring at lunch times once a week. My friends go to that so I could go with them.*
>
> **What else would help?**
>
> *Do more of my schoolwork on the online programmes that we can use. It really is just up to me to get my head in the game.*
>
> **What's worked for you to do this throughout the year? How have you managed to do this before?**
>
> *I got a new pack of highlighters which I have used a bit and it has helped. It means I actually have to look at what I am writing and be like, "What are the key words and what are the key things I have to do?"*

__What are some other things that will help you study and feel like you are__

__getting on top of it?__

When I have the house to myself and when the classroom is quiet. That also really

helps. I wear headphones to help with this. I can get too involved in the lyrics so now

I usually just play piano music. It reminds me of being in a cafe, listening to the chill

beats.

__From the study stuff we have talked about, what stands out to you as being the__

__most helpful?__

Just for me to get my head in the game.

__How will you manage to do that?__

I think I'm gonna actually start asking for help when I get stuck.

__Who are you going to ask for help?__

Probably my teacher.

__What will be the next thing that will help you manage to do that?__

Listening to chill music and actually trying to understand it rather than just staring at

it.

Throughout this conversation, Millie described that the most helpful part of what she had

shared was for her to get her *"head in the game".* This placed her in the position of being the

change maker and having agency in the process. As we reflected on the session later on, I

asked what stood out to Millie as things that she wants to do and can make happen. My

intention in asking this question was to invite Millie to discuss what she was particularly

motivated to do and for her to express what she believed she was able to do. To amplify

this, I asked about her confidence in making these things happen which help her, in order to

enhance her sense of motivation. Scaling confidence is a solution-focused technique to

invite the client to describe their belief in themselves to make their goals happen (Hanton,

2011).

So, what have you noticed stand out as something that you want to do and can make happen?

I will continue to be more positive cos I have definitely been more positive since last week when I spoke to you. I'm also gonna go on another bike ride today and that will help. I just wanna be able to get my head down and study. I will help others, but I just need to tell them that I will do that after I've done what I need to do. Overall, I will just be productive, get stuff done, get my head in the game and listen to chill beats.

Have you also noticed a shift in your confidence about making these things happen too?

Yeah!

What has been the difference you have noticed?

I've noticed that I have been more motivated, and if you have the motivation, why not do something?!

I did not scale confidence as Hanton (2011) suggests and enquired about her confidence instead. This invited her to describe the differences she has noticed within herself as a result of her increased confidence, which helped her to language the meaning these changes have had for her motivation. Millie's comment about motivation highlighted to me the sense of purpose and agency she had about making change happen. These conversations about what is helpful for Millie also had a future focus throughout. I observed that discussing what is helpful in a future sense, with rich and specific detail, helped Millie to imagine what that would be like, which increased her motivation and drive to make her goals happen.

Chapter Five: Connection to the Counselling Process

The counselling process with Millie was about her storying her life, with her own voice, so that she could then move forward to new and hopeful possibilities. She described that

"there's just so much" going on in her life, which made it hard for her to know how she wanted to progress. Millie found the whiteboard a useful tool during counselling as it enabled her to get her thoughts out of her head and gain a visual representation of it. After we had worked on the whiteboard one session, the following conversation occurred:

How do you feel as you look back at all of this on the whiteboard?

It seems really free. Yeah, I guess that's the word isn't it- free!

I feel a sense of liberation here? What has changed?

It think it's made everything a lot clearer. I have never really talked about it like this before, so actually seeing everything in front of me is like "Oh wow, yeah, that's what I wanna do!"

As she storied her life, and gave rich and detailed descriptions, this helped to provide shape and meaning to her future hopes, which she experienced as being *"free."* It also helped her to know what she wanted to do, to make her goals happen. Millie mentioned again in another session the usefulness of the whiteboard for her:

From all of the things that we have done together, what have been the things that have helped you?

Seeing the stuff on the whiteboard really helps. It was like a visual representation and was good to get it out of my head.

What else has helped?

Being able to just talk it all out. I don't really have anyone to talk to. I try to stay positive with my friends, but I don't really talk about my problems with them. By you asking me questions and me thinking of an answer, that was helpful. My feelings are in there but they are never expressed. So they are kind of just like a grey mass. When I actually think about it and analyse the feelings, it makes the answers a lot clearer.

It's almost like tapping into the grey makes the colour come out?!

Yeah, exactly!

How has it helped you?

It's just helped me plan my week more, so I'm more positive. It's brought me more awareness about what I need to start doing and what I need to do more. I think this has also made me realise that just cos I'm so bad on myself, doesn't mean that I'm bad to everyone.

So it's made your thoughts become less concrete and see that there are other perspectives out there?

Yeah, I don't really believe in the perspectives I have about myself as much as before.

What kind of difference has this made for you?

I just think talking about it and hearing your perspective on me has helped. It was better than my last counsellor person. They kinda just made me talk about how bad I felt and then the session was over. You have made me focus on positives and that has definitely been helpful for me! It has helped me see a better outlook.

Millie described that she doesn't usually have someone to talk to, so that in itself was helpful, in order for her to *"just talk it all out".* She also expressed how her thoughts and feelings which are present within her are like "*a grey mass"*. The questions that I was asking throughout our sessions gave her the opportunity to consider what that grey mass was. I felt as though this enabled *"the colour to come out"* as she described and then shaped her personal meanings about what was going on for her. Through talking and sharing with someone else, Millie was able to hear herself speak out loud, which gave shape to the meaning she made for her preferred identity and future. For Millie, this helped her to plan her week and know what she wants to do more of and do differently. It also shifted her view of herself to a more positive one, which helped her see things from a *"better outlook"*. I observed an increase in Millie's sense of agency over her life as she actively contributed to

113

making changes happen in her life and by describing her hopes for her preferred identity and future.

The co-constructed, solution-focused counselling approach was different to what Millie had experienced before in counselling. She described how she enjoyed focusing on positives. I interpreted this as her enjoying an approach that focused on solution-building, rather than being rooted in the problem. This invited conversations about what she hoped for, which she was able to articulate through a more positive lens. As I watched the recordings of our sessions, there weren't any times where I specifically shared my perspective on what I thought of Millie. However, my guess was that the positive regard which I viewed Millie from could have conveyed this to her, which she described. This could have also possibly come from me asking questions that conveyed my belief in her strengths and abilities through exploring how she has managed. For example, through questioning that aimed to give a self-compliment, to reinforce the things she noticed and approved of within herself (De Jong & Berg, 2013). I did this intentionally by asking questions such as, *"How have you managed?"* which invited Millie to describe her strengths and capabilities.

Chapter Six: Connection to Agency Outcomes

Millie described in detail throughout our sessions the changes she wanted to make in her life. Between sessions, she actively participated in putting those changes into action and then reported back during our next session how that was for her, without prompting. The words *"free"* and *"freeing"* came up multiple times and each time this was when she described how it felt after she had made a change she had hoped to make. She also recognised that as she heard herself speak out loud, this shaped her hopes for her preferred identity and future, which generated the changes she wanted to make happen. As she did this, it also had the effect of further increasing her motivation to make her desired changes

happen. Her agency also increased as she generated rich and specific goals and described her belief and confidence in herself, by saying *"I can do it."* I observed that the counselling process helped Millie develop new meanings for the ways that she viewed herself and what she is capable of, as she reflected on and described what she was able to do already, and in between our sessions.

After our final session, I asked Millie what had stood out from our sessions that had been the most helpful for her. She said:

> *I've realised how helpful getting outdoors is for me, I love biking, but I had just forgotten all about it. I love that I am getting back into it. I also wanna leave behind the ways I think about myself. I need to be around affirming people who know who I am, that will help with this. I just feel like I'm finally getting my shit together and putting it in a bag. I feel like this is helping me realise what I need to do to feel happy within myself, instead of making others happy all the time. I feel more in control of my life now and have just realised, "Wow I have come so far!" and "I can do it!"*

This captured the interplay between herself, others, her future and what is helpful for her. She described the clarity she had gained for what she was hoping for and how she was already taking steps to make this happen. As a result, she felt more in control of her life and recognised how far she had come already and was described the belief she had within herself through expressing that she believes she can do it. These outcomes of her sense of agency came through the solution-focused process of describing her future hopes in rich and specific detail and believing in herself to make her desired changes happen. This occurred through collaborative discussions about what is already working for her and what would be helpful for her to do to move towards her goals. She described that this increased her motivation because she knew what to do, so *"why not do something?"*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Epilogue: Discussion

Introduction

This research project aimed to explore how agency and strengths were co-constructed and experienced through solution-focused counselling with adolescents. I observed and reflected on my own solution-focused practice throughout the research, particularly how agency and strengths were co-constructed, and how this was experienced by both myself and the clients. To do this, I worked with three clients for three sessions each, who volunteered to participate in the research as part of their counselling. The data from two clients was then merged together to present two re-storied case studies. The interpretive and narrative analysis of the two client cases involved systematically gathering, analysing and representing people's stories as told by them (Etherington, 2013). This process of reconstruction and re-storying wove together the client and counsellor stories, as well as solution-focused literature to present multiple layers of how agency and strengths were experienced and co-constructed. Through the narrative analysis, there were six significant elements of the clients' stories that were told. These have been presented as six chapters of the multi-layered stories for how agency and strengths were co-constructed through the solution-focused counselling process. The findings from the research reflect and align with what is found in the literature in regard to agency and strengths. However, the findings also provide some useful extensions to the literature that may support practitioners working with clients to co-construct an enhanced sense of agency over their lives through solution-focused counselling, with a focus on strengths. This chapter will discuss the research findings alongside the literature in further detail. The strengths and limitations of this research project will then be discussed, as well as implications for professional counselling

practice. Future directions for research in this area will then be considered and proposed before the conclusion.

Chapter One: Connection to Self

A finding that emerged from the case studies with Chloe and Millie was that agency was enhanced when they had a strong sense of self and what is important to them which was enabled through the co-construction of solution-focused conversations. Having a sense of agency refers to the feeling of being in the driver's seat when it comes to carrying out actions (Moore, 2016). Through solution-focused counselling, the process is client-led as the client is viewed as the expert on their own life which helps to support their sense of agency (De Jong & Miller, 1995). Through asking solution-focused questions that centre around the client, this supported both Chloe and Millie to language for themselves what is important to them and what they are hoping for in their lives. Solution-focused questions that invite these descriptions are designed to elicit what clients want for themselves and the role they can play in making positive change happen (De Jong & Berg, 2013). The rich detailing in these conversations prioritises the client's voice about their sense of self which enhanced their agency and recognition of their strengths.

The connection of agency to a person's sense of self is highlighted by Gibson and Cartwright (2013) who recognise that from a social constructionist perspective, agency is constrained or enabled by interpersonal relationships and society. This view of agency is supported by Bandura (2006) who suggests that the construction of a person's sense of self as being agentic is not entirely based on a private process of self-reflection and instead, is influenced by a social process too (Bandura, 2006). However, Gibson and Cartwright (2013) argue that agency is also impacted on an individual level for people as it is experienced, reimagined and enacted in ways that have meaning and significance for their lives. Both

Chloe and Millie were about to experience a time of transition, where they were both moving on from their current school. For Chloe, she was moving onto new beginnings after finishing high school and for Millie, she was moving onto a new school. Kiecolt and Mabry (2000) suggest that the time of moving onto new beginnings, for example, moving from school to university, offers the opportunity for self-change. This time of transition that both clients were in, may have influenced the focus within our sessions on the construction of their identity in regard to who they want to be. Furthermore, Kiecolt and Mabry (2000) suggest that this process encourages clients to exercise agency as they worked to attain their desired goals for themselves and their preferred identity.

Preferred Identity

A finding that emerged from the counselling work with Chloe and Millie was that they were both invested in working towards constructing their view of themselves and their preferred identity in autonomous ways. The solution-focused approach, alongside other postmodern approaches, encourages clients to find ways to language and enact their preferred identity narratives (Gehart, 2012). O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis (1989) suggest that this involves clients languaging the actions, thoughts and behaviours they associate with being their 'best selves'. Through the co-construction and negotiation of these narratives, Etherington (2013) suggests that this helps to shape the meaning of the client's preferred sense of self and identity as the stories unfold. A solution-focused approach to the process of client's languaging and moving towards their preferred identity emphasises the client's voice, resources and agency (Thomas, 2013).

Having autonomy over personal identity was a topic that both Chloe and Millie spoke about in our sessions, as they wanted to become more authentic versions of themselves, and act in ways that aligned with their identity. The findings of this research align with literature which suggests that by enacting small behaviours associated with a client's best or preferred

self, this can support them to resume this preferred identity, rather than a problem-saturated identity (Gehart, 2012).

Gibson and Cartwright (2013) suggest that adolescence is a time where needs of autonomy and agency are imperative. Therefore, adolescent clients are often invested in the process of having agency and working towards the view of themselves as being autonomous (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013), which was a finding that emerged with Chloe and Millie in this research.

In a session with Chloe, I invited a discussion about her preferred identity by asking "*What would you say is the most accurate representation of yourself right now?*" I then went on to invite her to share in more detail about her preferred identity by asking, "*What would be the parts of yourself you would you want to see more of?*" In response to this question, Chloe shared her preferred identity by saying, "*Proper real happiness, and like getting real enjoyment out of being with them and life. I don't wanna focus too hard on what happened, and I don't wanna let it hold me back in how I truly express myself. I guess to just have a real, good, positive outlook on life. I wanna be able to see things in places and not just instantly remember what happened that night.*" Later on in the session, in response to Chloe saying that she wanted to have a strong sense of knowing who she is, I asked "*And who are you? How would you describe who you are, and who you want to be?*" She storied her identity and sense of self as "*Someone who has gone through something very hard, and didn't think they would bounce back from it, but they did. They have grown from those experiences and are able to support others who have been through a hard time too*". This process highlighted her as being an active participant in how she constructed her personal meanings about herself, as a result of the death of her mum, as opposed to this being constructed by external influences.

With Millie, I asked *"What does being yourself look like for you?"* to invite descriptions of herself from her own perspective, as she had shared that the voices of other people had been powerful in shaping her view of herself. She responded by saying "*I notice that I have different personas for different things. So, at school, I'm quiet and have my headphones in, trying to work. At home I am loud, trying to be funny and hard working. With my friends I can just be myself*". This highlighted an instance of success for her, where she is able to be herself with her friends, which we used to build a more detailed picture of her sense of identity and the relational settings this occurs in.

Bidwell (2000) suggests that the present and future focus of the solution-focused approach is found to communicate a sense of hope and possibility. I noticed that the conversations became more hopeful when the clients were invited to story their preferred identities in a future sense. This was also enhanced through the solution-focused approach of viewing the client as the expert on their own lives, which invited them to be active participants in this process (Berg & De Jong, 1996). Through storying their preferred identity in a future sense, this helped to build solutions and new possibilities as Bidwell (2000) suggests. This was a hopeful process and enabled clients to hear their own voice over how they constructed and shaped their identity in ways that were meaningful for them, which further encouraged their agency over their sense of self.

Chapter Two: Connection to Others

Bandura (1986) suggests that human functioning is a product of reciprocal interplay of intrapersonal, behavioural and environmental determinants. As a result, people are not autonomous agents and their behaviour is not completely determined by their own personal influences (Bandura, 1986). Having a connection to others in developing agency is important because as Bandura (2006) suggests, as individuals, we are socially situated and

constructed. This is why psychological concepts are socially embedded (Bandura, 2006). Therefore, when working towards gaining agency in collective settings, this process is supported by working with others with shared intentionality (Bandura, 2006).

The solution-focused approach also recognises the importance of significant others in the interactional contexts of a client's life and incorporates the use of relationships questions to invite helpful descriptions from different perspectives (De Jong & Berg, 2013). Relationship questions that I asked throughout the sessions with Chloe and Millie invited them to describe interactional events and their meanings in relation to their solutions (De Jong & Berg, 2013). When Chloe and Millie each described what is important to them in their relationships and what difference this makes for them to elicit further detail, this helped to further shape their own personal meanings. Chloe described this process as being helpful for her to *"know who I have and why"*. This conversation helped her to plan who she wanted to reach out to, to start sharing about her experiences of losing her mum so that she could be better understood and supported by them.

By considering the role of others in in the client's lives, this helped them to generate understandings of what they valued in their relationships, which supported them to work towards their goals of more fulfilling relationships with others. For Millie, this helped her to recognise where these hopes for her relationships were already happening in her life and highlighted who she is able to be herself with and who she wanted to invest in further.

Relationships were also found to provide a significant role in how the clients worked towards their other goals, beyond improving their relationships, as Bandura (2006) suggests. In this research, the findings highlighted that when the client's relationships aligned with what is important to them, this provided meaningful support which enabled them to thrive and work towards their goals for their lives. However, their relationships were also described at times to constrain them from making the changes they wanted to see happen in their lives. This

aligns with the findings from Gibson and Cartwright (2013) which suggests that the relational contexts of a client's life play a significant role in supporting or limiting their sense of agency over their lives. This process of inviting descriptions of the client's relational contexts supported them to make their own personal meanings about what was important to them and what they needed to do to move forward in their relationships in ways that were helpful for them.

Instances of Success

A finding of this research was that instances of success provided powerful shifts in how clients described themselves in their relational contexts. For Millie in particular, describing instances of success appeared to be a significant part of the counselling process for her. Exceptions to the problem is a term that is often used in solution-focused counselling. However, this is often referred to as instances of success which better reflects a solution-focused mindset (Shennan, 2014).

The solution-focused approach views the world as constantly changing, so there are always exceptions to the problem to be found (Hanton, 2011). In my work with Millie, I asked questions to elicit descriptions of instances of success beyond the problems she had described. For example, when we explored relationships she felt like herself in and when she has felt like she has fitted in. As suggested by De Jong and Miller (1995), exceptions help to highlight what is working for the client and helps them to become more aware of their current and past successes, which increases their awareness of strengths and personal agency in relation to their goals. This was also described by O'Connell (2012) to help strengthen the client's ability to do more of what works, which improves self-regulation and efficacy.

For both Chloe and Millie, when exceptions were described, particularly in the context of their relationships, there was an increased sense of hope and optimism present in the room. This was an outcome that De Jong and Berg (2013) suggested can happen for both the client and counsellor because exceptions encourage awareness of strengths and what works for the client which affirms their agency and ability to make change happen. As a result, this can bring a sense of optimism and hope (De Jong & Berg, 2013).

Relationship Questions

Relationship questions were found to be effective at providing a comfortable distance for both Chloe and Millie to respond from about their strengths and sense of self. This finding is supported by De Jong and Berg (2013) who suggest that relationship questions can support a client to respond more comfortably about the strengths that others may notice in them. This is said to be particularly effective when working with adolescents (De Jong and Berg, 2013).

Relationship questions such as *"What would (a significant other) notice?"* were asked with Millie when asking what her friends would have noticed when she said she felt fulfilled with them. This supported her to describe from an external perspective what was happening for her in this meaningful moment, to elicit further detail about what this meant for her. I found that solution-focused relationship questions were effective for Millie to share more comfortably about her strengths, as suggested by De Jong & Berg (2013). Millie found it difficult to speak about herself positively from her own perspective but appeared to be more comfortable with doing this from the perspective of her friends.

With Chloe, the use of relationship questions helped to provide more detail for her to shape her personal meaning associated with her sense of self. This was because she wanted to become a more accurate version of herself in her relational settings, so we explored this

from an external perspective of what her friends and family notice about her, to enhance her own process of meaning making for her sense of self and preferred identity.

Relational Use of Strengths

When working with Millie, she appeared to express her strengths more openly when describing how she used them in her relationships with others. This was in comparison to speaking about how she saw her strengths within herself and how they were present in her life personally, which she found more difficult to do. Hay (2005) suggests that new information which is not consistent with a person's self-concept is more likely to be disregarded or challenged. This may have been the case with Millie when she was describing how she uses her strengths in a relational context, which may have been more comfortable for her to do, similar to when responding to relationship questions, as described above (De Jong & Berg, 2013). This finding is supported by Hanton (2011) who suggests that when it is difficult for clients to identify and describe their strengths on their own, strengths cards can be used to ask what strengths others might see in them, or how they use them with others. This highlighted how strengths are relational as Jones-Smith (2016) suggests.

I incorporated these suggestions from Hanton (2011) into how I used the strengths cards in my solution-focused counselling work for this research. The collaborative conversations that Millie and I had about how she uses the strengths she identified and what difference that makes for herself and others, supported a process of Millie constructing her view of herself with strengths. This helped to extend the use of strengths cards away from being an explicit and directive approach which Hanton (2011) cautions against. Instead, this approach aligned with a more solution-focused, client-led and collaborative way of working which Hanton (2011) and Jones-Smith (2016) suggest is an appropriate fit.

Hanton (2011) suggests that strengths cards can be useful for supporting people to identify their strengths, which was a finding that emerged with Millie. Initially this process appeared to be difficult for her to do personally and more comfortable when expressed in relation to others. However, this process invited Millie to describe her strengths using her own voice and as she looked at the cards in quiet reflection, she said this *"ignited a spark"* within her. This conversation happened at the end of the session when I asked what had been helpful for her. She said, "*I actually noticed that as I looked at the strengths cards, and I read those positive words, it kind of ignited a spark within me. It was encouraging seeing them and being reminded of the good parts of myself and then thinking about how I use them in my life"*. This appeared to invite Millie to have ownership and agency over how she constructed her view of herself as having strengths and the meaning she shaped for how she uses her strengths in her relationships with others. This helped her more concrete and problem-focused thoughts about herself to become unstuck and opened up new possibilities for how she described herself. She did not speak openly about her strengths and how she saw them in her life personally at the time in the session. However, this conversation indicated that a more internal process of reflection and meaning making was occurring personally for her which *"ignited a spark"*.

Chapter Three: Connection to Future

Having a connection to the future was where the most powerful shifts occurred in the client's sense of agency throughout our sessions. Bandura (1989) suggests that through cognitive representation, visualised futures are brought into the present as motivators and guides of behaviour. The focus on the future is extremely important in the solution-focused approach, because the future is not here yet, so it does not have to follow the same difficulties that have been experienced in the past or the present. The solution-focused approach is about finding out what a client wants, not what they do not want (Hanton, 2011). The ability to bring

anticipated future outcomes into action promotes foresightful behaviours, which when projected over an extended period of time, can help shape matters of value, meaning, purpose and direction of a person's life (Bandura, 2006). This aligned with the findings of this research because when the clients described their preferred future, free from the barriers of their current difficulties, this supported them to imagine themselves in that hopeful future. They were then able to story their preferred future in further detail, which supported them to sense what difference it would make and why it is important for them, for a tangible experience of giving shape to their hopes, through being the authors of it.

Describing Preferred Future in Detail

In the research, when Chole and Millie were invited to describe their preferred future in rich and specific detail, this helped them to visualise what will be happening and what they will be doing instead (Hanton, 2011). The assumptions and associated skills and techniques of the solution-focused approach have a 'present-to-future focus' (Murphy, 1996). This includes the use of eliciting the client's preferred future. Through our co-constructed conversations and my approach of being a curious and naïve enquirer, this invited the clients to describe their preferred futures in further detail which helped the clients to position themselves in it and visualise it happening. This increased their motivation and desire to take action towards making that future happen, as Bandura (1989) suggests. This was enhanced further through exploring the steps for the clients to take in order to make progress in the direction of their preferred future (Hanton, 2011) which will be discussed further in *'Chapter Four: Connection to What Helps'*.

Solution-focused questions that invited rich and specific descriptions of the client's preferred futures included scaling what will be happening at a 10, which is the highest point on the scale. When they have described this, asking questions to elicit further detail such as *"What else?"* and *"What difference will that make?"* helped Chloe and Millie speak their hopes out

126

loud and visualise their hopes happening. I also used the word *"imagine"* in some of my

questioning to elicit the client's preferred future, with her visualising it happening, by asking

further questions to amplify it. For example, with Millie I adapted the miracle question to a

simplified version of it and asked her, "*Imagine life next year, you are stepping into your new*

school and it is exactly how you want it to be. What will that be like?" This question invited

her to describe what she was hoping for when she is at her new school and what that will be

like. These solution-focused ways of eliciting a client's preferred future in rich and specific

detail helped to provide direction for Chloe and Millie because their preferred futures helped

to establish the goals they wanted to be working towards, as Hanton (2011) suggests.

The Use of 'Instead' Questions

When Chloe and Millie were describing their preferred future, particularly through describing

the 10 in scaling, I used the question *"What will you be instead?"* This question helped to

shift the languaging of the preferred future towards being more positive and hopeful so that it

was more powerful and meaningful. This is because the solution-focused approach seeks to

move towards a preferred future, rather than away from the problem because this defines

the work done by the problem (Hanton, 2011). This was a powerful moment for Chloe, who

shared that when a 10 was happening, *"all the feelings of blame would be gone"*. When I

responded with *"What would be there instead?"* she paused, let out a deep breath and

responded with, "*Proudness. Happiness. Still feeling supported by people if I needed it, like*

my family and friends". This helped Chloe to shape her future in ways that were not defined

by blame. When Millie was describing the 10 during scaling, she said *"I wouldn't be so*

stressed" which I responded to by asking, *"What would you be instead?"* I did this to invite

her to share a more hopeful description of her preferred future, in ways that were not defined

by the problem as Hanton (2011) suggests. As she responded to this, there was a

noticeable shift in her demeanour as she responded, *"I would be more productive".*

As Millie described this preferred future, it became clear that she was motivated to get there. In our next session, she had already put her plans into action and said *"Yeah, I feel calm! I am finally getting my shit together. I've made a timetable for the weekend so I can get work done which has helped manage my stress. Oh! And I went for a bike ride for the first time in ages after I spoke to you!"* This indicated to me that through describing the preferred future in rich and specific detail it then increased her motivation and helped to prepare her with a plan for how to get there. In turn, this supported her self-belief, efficacy and competency in reaching her goals. This is a process that is supported by Bandura (2006) with the power of forethought and plans for action positively influencing agency and ability to work towards selected goals.

Chapter Four: Connection to What Helps

As Chloe and Millie described their preferred futures in detail, this helped shape the direction they wanted to move towards and then helped them to identify the changes they wanted to make happen (Hanton, 2011). Bandura (2006) suggests that *"Agency involves not only the deliberative ability to make choices and action plans, but also the ability to construct appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution" (p. 165).* The solution-focused approach views the client as the expert on their life and that they have skills, strengths and resources that they have used before and can use again (Hanton, 2011). Therefore, in discussions about what is helpful for the clients, this involved me inviting them to describe this for themselves, which helped to highlight what they do already that works well for them. Bandura (2006) argues that a person's belief in their self-efficacy is the most important component of human agency. As clients reflected on what works for them already, this highlighted their instances of success and enhanced their view of themselves as having agency and being capable of making their desired changes happen. Larson and Angus (2011) recognise that adolescence is a particularly important time for adolescents to

develop agency skills, such as cognitive tools, insights, knowledge, and actions to help achieve their goals. This helps to build their perception of self-efficacy, which is important for transitioning into adulthood (Zimmerman and Cleary, 2006).

Scaling

Scaling provided an effective way of exploring what is helpful for clients. This is because it firstly established the client's preferred future and then invited the clients to describe what resources, skills and strategies they have used before to move up the scale to where they are now. This then helped to shape the client's steps for moving forward in the direction of their preferred future, through utilising what works well for them already, or by applying new strategies. By drawing attention to the client's resources, skills and strengths, this supported them to understand what is helpful for them in order to be prepared for making the changes they hoped for in their lives. O'Connell (2012) suggests that focusing on what works strengthens the client's ability to do more of this, and improves self-regulation (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006).

During scaling with Chloe, I asked "*How did you manage to move up the scale from a 3 to a 6?*" which invited her to describe the strategies that she found useful. From this conversation, it helped her to shape what she wanted to do as she moved towards her current goals, as she recognised that these strategies have worked before and can work again. This approach supports the solution-focused emphasis of honouring and strengthening the client's agency and competencies by asking the client to share their own ideas about what has worked before, or what works currently for them, as opposed to the counsellor offering suggestions (Thomas, 2013).

Coping Questions

The questions that I asked throughout the sessions with Chloe and Millie such as *"How have you managed?", "How do you manage?"* and *"How will you manage?"* are examples of coping questions used in the solution-focused approach. They have a past, present and future focus to invite clients to describe what is helpful for them to cope and by enquiring about what already works for them. These questions were also found to implicitly communicate the counsellor's belief in the clients' and encouraged them to express their strengths, resources and skills in how they manage and how they have managed. This further enhanced the clients' awareness of their abilities that are helpful for them to cope. The idea of complementing the client is something I experience tension with because I prefer for clients to recognise their own strengths through having independent agency over this process, rather than me having a role of importance by doing this directly.

I believe that compliments have more power when they are expressed by the client, for the client. This is supported by De Jong and Berg (2013) who suggest that compliments have a more significant influence on the client when they come up with them themselves. These questions help to support this process of independent recognition of client strengths. They were also experienced as useful questions, because Chloe identified *"being asked how I managed"* as a helpful part of one of our sessions. This was because it enabled her to remember what is helpful for her, which she can do again to support her to move towards her goals. This also helped her to believe that she can do it, through realising she has done the strategies before and found that they have worked well. With Chloe during scaling, I also asked these coping questions to enquire about how she had managed to cope since the death of her mum, which she found helpful as it validated her ability to cope and implicitly communicated my belief in her strength and resilience, without directly making a direct compliment of this, as suggested by De Jong and Berg (2013). She then made new meanings for how she had experienced that time in her life through feeling proud of herself

for how well she has coped. She said, *"Even though I have been through so much, I have been able to keep being strong, and that one person, and I am proud of myself."*

Steps Towards Preferred Future

By describing what is helpful when considering the steps to move towards their preferred futures, this helped Chloe and Millie to make short-term and specific plans. Bandura (1982) suggests that this helps to provide immediate motivational sub-goals to work towards, which then provide guides towards action which lead to larger, future goals. Millie noticed that as we scaled what she was hoping for and then discussed strategies that will help her work towards her goals, she increased her confidence to make that happen. When asked what difference this made for her, she went on to say, "*I've noticed that I have been more motivated, and if you have the motivation, why not do something?!*" This indicated that her motivation and confidence increased when she had a plan in place, which supported the realisation of her goals.

Bandura (1982) suggests that there is an important connection that can be made between proximal sub-goals and the development of self-perceptions of efficacy. This concept was recognised in this research as clients described the steps they would take in the short-term, in order to move up the scale slightly to head towards their goals. For example, when I asked Chloe, *"What steps would you take to move from a 6 to an 8 by the next time I see you?"* This question was guided by previous information gathered from Chloe, because 8 was her goal and by the next session was her desired time frame. When both Chloe and Millie described what will help them work towards their goals and then through me asking, *"How confident are you that you can make this happen?"* this provided the clients with an opportunity to verbally express their beliefs in themselves and their efficacy, which in turn, enhanced their sense of motivation to do it as Millie had described above.

Chapter Five: Connection to Counselling Process

Use of the Whiteboard

Both of the clients who I worked with in this research project shared that they found the use of the whiteboard in our counselling sessions helpful. I did not use it in my first session with Chloe, however during our end of session feedback, she suggested that we use it next time we met. At the end of a session with Millie I asked "*From all of the things that we have done together, what have been the things that have helped you?*" She said, *"Seeing the stuff on the whiteboard really helps. It was like a visual representation and was good to get it out of my head."* The use of the whiteboard has been recognised by Grant and Usher (2011) as being useful for immediately externalising the problem. By having collaborative conversations using the whiteboard, Grant and Usher (2011) suggest that this visually places the information on something external which creates a physical space between the person and the problem.

In this solution-focused research, problems were not explored specifically. However, I noticed that the use of the whiteboard enabled both clients to speak about themselves in positive ways more freely, as it became less difficult and confronting to do this when externalised. This finding aligns with Grant and Usher (2011) who also noticed that the use of the whiteboard created an honouring space where clients can recognise their knowledge, skills and strengths. Additionally, the act of placing these ideas, experiences and stories on the whiteboard added value and weight to the significance of them (Grant & Usher, 2011).

For both Chloe and Millie, I noticed a change in their demeanour as we externalised their challenges and hopes by writing them on the whiteboard. This was apparent in their more open and expressive body language, as well as their uplifted tone of voice and energy. Bera (2010) suggests that the use of the whiteboard offers a reflective and mindful practice

through clients observing and noticing what they have expressed. In their research, clients would stop, spend some time looking at what was on the whiteboard, then take a breath and consider the influence that these stories have on their lives. Grant and Usher (2011) reflected this same finding and noticed that at times, clients would stare in a fascinated way at the whiteboard and as a result, a sense of self-compassion was also experienced.

For Chloe, this was particularly evident as we used scaling to highlight how she had grown from the experience of losing her mum, with how she was then, to now and how she hopes for things to be in the future. Chloe recognised how well she had managed and grown from her experiences and this made her feel proud of herself. These reflections highlighted a moment of self-compassion for Chloe, as she looked back at what she had shared that was written on the whiteboard. The meaning she made from this externalised process was shared when she said "*I shouldn't be blaming myself. I wasn't in the wrong and I shouldn't feel mad at myself for not knowing what I should have done".* When asked how this was for her, she said *"I guess it feels good. To kinda like, imagine it. It helps to understand it, and it helps to see how far I've come from back then to now, and how the thoughts have changed".* The process of reflecting on what had been externalised on the whiteboard helped to shift her feelings of blame and responsibility. This finding is supported by Corcoran (1998) who found that solution-focused counselling enhances agency and minimises feelings associated with lack of control and self-blame by emphasising strengths and helping adolescents see that problems exist outside of themselves, which the whiteboard helped to facilitate.

For Millie, as we discussed what she was hoping for in her preferred future, she positioned herself in relation to the whiteboard and picked up a pen then started adding words to describe the 10 in scaling. She then began circling the parts that were already written down that were most important to her. When the client and counsellor position themselves sitting together to collaborate together using the whiteboard, this can offer a sense of unity (Grant & Usher, 2011). Furthermore, the process of looking at stories on the whiteboard invites

clients to become active participants in the process and empowers them to be involved in decision making (Grant & Usher, 2011). This was particularly noticed in this research through the use of scaling on the whiteboard and describing steps towards their preferred future. In this example, Millie actively claimed her voice over her own life and had agency and hope over how she authored this on the whiteboard. As she looked back at what had been written on the whiteboard at the end of the session she said, "*It seems really free. Yeah, I guess that's the word isn't it- free!"* When I enquired about what had changed, she said *"It think it's made everything a lot clearer. I have never really talked about it like this before, so actually seeing everything in front of me is like "Oh wow, yeah, that's what I wanna do!"*

As Millie identifies here, the whiteboard supported her to observe and understand the ideas and stories about herself, which helped to scaffold and illuminate her preferred narrative and future, which Chloe also experienced (Grant & Usher, 2011). The whiteboard encouraged a rich, energetic and exciting collaboration, especially when we were exploring the client's preferred futures and identities, which aligned with the findings from Grant and Usher (2011). When ideas are transferred to a whiteboard, using the client's words, images and representations of themselves, this supports the solution-focused idea that clients are the experts (Berg & De Jong, 1996) and they have ownership of authorship, which enhances their agency.

"Being Able to Talk it Out"

Both clients shared with me that they don't usually have someone to talk to, so the counselling process was helpful for providing an opportunity for this. Millie recognised that throughout our sessions *"being able to talk it out"* was helpful for her. She went on to say *"by you asking me questions and me thinking of an answer, that was helpful. My feelings are in there, but they are never expressed. So, they are kind of just like a grey mass. When I*

actually think about it and analyse the feelings, it makes the answers a lot clearer". The process of speaking her thoughts out loud through counselling, helped to give shape and meaning to how she storied her life, so that things became clearer for her. In response to what she shared, I recognised that *"It's almost like tapping into the grey makes the colour come out?!"* to which she replied*, "Yeah, exactly!"*

Bandura (1986) suggests that self-reflectiveness is an important factor in developing agency. This is particularly in regard to reflecting on how thoughts and actions align (Bandura, 1986). The solution-focused approach focuses particularly on descriptions of the client's hopes for change and what they will be doing differently (De Jong & Berg, 2013). This has a practical focus, which supports the connection between thoughts and action for agency, as Bandura (1986) suggests, by *"talking it out"* and finding ways forward towards the clients' solutions and goals.

The solution-focused approach values a client-centred and client-led approach, which views clients positively and holds the belief that they have strengths, resources and skills that they can utilise in this process (De Jong & Berg, 2013; Young, 2005). This helps to establish an empowering therapeutic alliance which supports any of the work done in counselling. The social constructionist viewpoint which underpins the solution-focused approach also encourages adolescents to gain a sense of control through being seen as the expert on their lives and collaborating in a co-constructed process, to explore new meanings and solutions (Berg & De Jong, 1996).

Morton and Montgomery (2013) suggest that counselling approaches which encourage adolescents' to be actively involved in decision making, helps them to gain agency and resilience which can support them as they transition into adulthood, particularly when there is a focus on strengths. Having a focus on strengths is inherent to the solution-focused approach and I tied this in by asking *"How have you managed?"* and by exploring exceptions

as well as current and past successes. By focusing on what works, this helps to instil hope for both the client and the counsellor as Lethem (2002) suggests. Furthermore, this focus on strengths, resources and skills supports the therapeutic alliance and encourages clients to be part of the decision-making processes to make their desired changes happen. Welfare, Farmer and Lile (2013) suggest that when counselling from this approach, it empowers the client within their own context and encourages them to have the self-belief to move towards the changes they want to make. This was recognised by all clients, when they all said *"I can do it"* as they expressed their confidence and self-belief in making their desired changes happen. The collaborative counselling process with a focus on strengths is not about the counsellor making good, solid, decisions for clients. Instead, it is about the counsellor creating the opportunities for clients to do that for themselves, individually and collectively with their own sense of agency driving the process (Saleebey, 2008).

Chapter Six: Connection to Agency Outcomes

Chloe and Millie made significant changes towards their goals, which occurred both within themselves and in their external circumstances of their lives. I hoped to explore how their sense of agency was co-constructed through the solution-focused counselling approach. Throughout this research, agency was not explored specifically in the sessions, however the clients noticed the difference within themselves when they made their desired changes happen in their lives. As a result, they experienced an increased sense of self-belief through seeing their self-efficacy and agency in action. The clients connected to agency most predominantly through the outcomes they recognised within themselves as a result of the changes they had made. As the clients recognised these outcomes within themselves, this affirmed the changes they had made and then motivated them towards making further changes happen in the direction of their hopes.

Bandura (2006) found that people who develop their competencies, self-regulatory skills and enabling beliefs in their efficacy can generate a wider array of options that expand their freedom of action and as a result, are more successful in realising their desired futures. The solution-focused counselling process supported clients to develop in these areas which enabled them to become aware of their strengths, skills and resources in order to believe in themselves and work towards their goals. Bandura (2006) states that, *"When viewed from a social cognitive perspective, freedom is conceived not just passively as the absence of constraints, but also proactively as the exercise of self-influence in the service of selected goals and desired outcomes"* (p. 165). This positions the client in the active process of working towards their desired goals, to determine their sense of freedom through the actions that they made as a result of their own influence in the process.

As the clients all experienced the outcomes that occurred as a result of their agency, this was also about them becoming authors over the future courses their lives take (Bandura, 2006). For Millie, she had a difficult conversation with someone after our first session which helped her to feel more hopeful about her future of moving to a new school. She reported that the outcomes she noticed from this conversation was "*Now I feel so happy and free!*" and then later said again, "*It's so freeing!*" Further outcomes that Millie described as a result of the changes she made in her life were "*I feel more in control of my life now, and have just realised, 'Wow I have come so far!' and 'I can do it!'*" She made significant progress towards her goals of caring for herself and managing her stress. She said, *"I've realised how helpful getting outdoors is for me, I love biking, but I had just forgotten all about it. I love that I am getting back into it. I also wanna leave behind the ways I think about myself. I need to be around affirming people who know who I am, that will help with this. I just feel like I'm finally getting my shit together and putting it in a bag".* This highlighted her efficacy and the belief that she had in herself to continue to make these changes happen.

For Chloe, she wanted to be able to manage her thoughts associated with the death of her mum. This was more about having agency over her inner world, rather than her outer world. Bandura (2006) recognises that in addition to people regulating their actions, they also live in a psychic environment largely of their own making. Consequently, the self-management of their inner life is also part of the them becoming agentic. This was a finding that Chloe highlighted from the research through managing her thoughts to shift them towards self-compassion as opposed to self-blame, which aligned with the findings from Bandura (2006).

As a result of the solution-focused counselling process, Chloe said *"I feel like I know how to manage the thoughts now and remembering who I am as well helps me to do that"*. When I asked how this was for her, she said *"The proudness is there, and perseverance is also there, cos I didn't give up. It made me realise that I can do it. I don't hide or blame myself anymore. I believe that I can do things without letting my past affect it"*. This was a significant moment for Chloe as she released the blame she had felt for many years and could see the situation from a new perspective. This highlighted her agency and control over the situation, through how she has managed the thoughts in helpful ways which will shape how she moves forward towards her future hopes.

Counsellor Learning and Implications for Practice

The following points are offered as helpful guides for practitioners to co-construct agency and strengths through their work with adolescents. These have come from considering the findings from the client's and counsellor experiences of the co-construction of agency and strengths through solution-focused counseling. These offerings reflect the key learning that I generated from this research.

- A strong therapeutic alliance is an important foundation for the process of supporting client agency. This is enhanced through the solution-focused counselling approach being client-led and having a focus on client strengths and what is working.

- Asking questions that centre around the client and how things are for them, keeps the focus on them and puts them in the driver's seat for how they respond to things happening in their lives. This increases their sense of control and ownership of their responses, experiences, hopes and plans.

- Inviting clients to language themselves and their preferred identify offers them the opportunity to express their own voice over their identity, which gives shape to their own personal meanings about their sense of self, rather than being overpowered by the voices of others in their life.

- Future focused questions that invite the description of new possibilities such as "*Imagine...*", "*If…*" and "*When…*" invite clients to consider and then language what they are wanting to see change in their lives and has a hopeful, expectant focus.

- Inviting descriptions of exceptions and instances of success help to shift the focus to a hopeful place, which supports clients to believe in themselves, their strengths and their efficacy to make change happen in their lives.

- Strengths cards can offer a process of personal reflection by clients looking at affirming words of strengths and then considering how they resonate with them. Millie said that this process *"ignited a spark"* within her and enabled her to describe how she used her strengths. This empowered her own voice and affirmed her descriptions of her preferred identity.

- Using the whiteboard supports a collaborative process of externalisation. This supported clients to speak about themselves in positive ways and to see that problem exists outside of themselves. By using the whiteboard, clients are actively involved in scaffolding and illuminating their preferred future and identity. Decision making was also enhanced from the meaning the clients made from reflecting on what was on the whiteboard in the session.

- Scaling is a solution-focused technique that incorporates the connections to self, others, future and what helps. When describing the preferred future of the 10 in rich and specific detail, this makes it easier to imagine and consequently, increases the client's motivation and desire to get there.

- Experiencing agency is empowering for both the client and the counsellor and motivates further positive outcomes such as enhanced agency hope, self-belief and efficacy.

Strengths and Limitations

This research had both strengths and limitations throughout the process. The practice-based research meant that I was a researcher, participant and counsellor in the process. When I began my first research session, I noticed that the scaling form and following interview questions which I had planned to use at the end of each session appeared to interrupt the counselling process. As a result, I considered other ways that I could gather similar data that was in line with my usual counselling practice. This included asking questions at the end of the session that were inquisitive about how the client found the session, what was helpful for them and what differences they might want to make if we were to meet again. This is often done through the use of a Session Rating Scale (SRS) from Miller et al. (2003). However, I opted to do this in a verbal way, in line with how I had conducted the rest of the counselling sessions for a smoother transition. During these conversations, I added the research questions in here as they fitted appropriately. For example, asking *"What has been helpful from our session today?"* and *"What difference has that made for you?"* This also provided a more meaningful chance for them to reflect personally on their experience and through this process, they expressed their belief in themselves and their ability to make change happen. This was more open for the clients to respond freely, as opposed to responding in an interview setting, with the possibility of my questions becoming leading.

This could have been seen as a limitation, that the follow up research questions at the end of the sessions interrupted the sessions. However, the end result in how I addressed this challenge appeared to generate genuine data in a more real life, practice-based setting. This change to my planned research methods is supported by Hanton (2011) and Miller (2008) who suggest that solution-focused practice is an evolving approach which should be client-led, instead of formulaic and may be adapted to suit what works best for each client. This can enhance the therapeutic alliance as well. The research questions I used in the first session appeared to create a more formal and contrived environment which did not fit with how the rest of the session was, which was more relaxed and fluid. By adapting this part of the session, it supported the therapeutic alliance because of how it aligned more closely to how the rest of the session was experienced. This may have also provided more valid data, and therefore been a strength of the research.

Multiple sources of data were gathered to strengthen the methodological process. I did this through gathering video recordings of the sessions so that I could further listen to and observe the counselling interactions and experiences for both the client and the counsellor. I listened to these recordings and transcribed the sessions almost in full so that I could connect deeply with the content and experience it from an external perspective. This was then compared to my own personal reflections and observations of the sessions which I had noted down. I also took pictures of the work that the clients and I did on the whiteboard, with their permission, so that I could use this as data to analyse as well. Through having multiple sources of data, this helps to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings and the depth that I connected with the data.

In addition to having multiple sources of data, I also reviewed the findings that I had generated with my counselling and research supervisors. This supported the process of minimising researcher bias, by gaining a range of perspectives on how the data had been

analysed. As we spoke about the findings, this process enhanced my own clarity and process of meaning making because I could consider new ideas which extended my own understandings. I found that it strengthened the data that I had gathered and also confirmed how it had been generated, so that it accurately reflected the data. By addressing researcher bias, this strengthened the findings and their validity.

Overall, the research generated in-depth information about how adolescents develop agency though a co-constructed solution-focused counselling process. Each client that I worked with had a different reason for coming to counselling and were working on a diverse range of challenges and hopes. Despite this, the process still generated data and findings across the cases that were meaningful for the development of agency. This highlighted to me how flexible and adaptable the solution-focused counselling approach is to suit the different needs of each client. This counselling process did not follow a set structure and the findings are not intended to suggest that. However, the solution-focused questions asked in the sessions supported the construction of meaning making for each client, in terms of what they were hoping for and the steps they wanted to take to move in that direction. This puts the client in the driver's seat and enhances the control and agency they have over their life. Therefore, a strength of this research is how adaptable the findings can be for practitioners to support client agency and strengths through solution-focused counselling, regardless of what clients present with.

The research that has been conducted is a small-scale qualitative study. Therefore, theoretical generalisations about how agency and strengths are co-constructed with adolescents as a result of this research are limited (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). Instead, this research provides a snapshot of how agency and strengths were co-constructed which may prompt further questioning and consideration for practitioners in their own work, to help guide their own way of doing things and framing up what supporting agency for their clients means for them. Gibson and Cartwright (2013), who conducted research on clients' retrospective experiences of agency in counselling in New Zealand, suggest that their

142

findings generated from middle-class youth may have assisted more opportunities for clients to claim their agency than other groups constrained by economics or social marginalisation. This is a consideration that I give to my research also, as well as how in New Zealand, ideas about counselling are based on Western settings, where social ideas of agency and the forms of counselling are similar (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013).

This research had a participant recruitment process of emailing all students between Year 9 and 13 at school, advertising the research project and asking for volunteers. This method was chosen as it gave people the ability to freely choose to participate or not and to ensure that the whole school community between Year 9 and 13 had the option to take part. I had hoped that this this would mean that the research would reach and then consequently recruit a diverse range of participants. However, when I started getting responses to this email noticed that my methodological processes of recruitment appeared to limit the diversity of participants. This was because I was going to choose participants based on the order that they responded to discuss the research with them. I noticed that as I began meeting with each potential participant, they all appeared to be very similar. For example, they were female students in the senior school, who all appeared to be highly motivated.

This was an occurrence that Gibson and Cartwright (2013) noticed in their research, where the process of participants putting themselves forward to take part is an act that may involve a degree of agency. This then had me wondering about my recruitment process and how it could have naturally captured clients who were of an agentic demographic. This could have had the effect of me generating data that was more aligned with people who were agentic and motivated. This could have affected the overall findings as the participants could have been more open and willing to make change happen in their lives and therefore be more inclined to exercise agency. As I reflected on this, I considered that if I had more time available for recruitment, I could have visited assemblies to tell students about the research and then get interested people to write their names down in a box as they left the assembly. I could then have pulled names out at random to capture a broader range of people. This is

because many students do not check their emails and by taking away the condition of first in first served, this could have meant that I would not be prioritising highly motivated students to participate.

Alongside the similarities in client characteristics, they were also all female, of a similar age between 15 and 18 and all New Zealand European in ethnicity. This means that the data generated was not from a diverse range of clients, although the presenting issues were diverse, the participant population was not. This could have limited the findings to a narrow population, however it also may have not, although I do not have the data to support findings either way. In addition to this, the presenting issues that the clients had were diverse, however they were also all relatively within their control. Therefore, clients were able to make necessary changes in their situations. Often adolescent clients come to counselling to discuss issues that are affected by situations outside of their control, for example concerns regarding their family. This makes it difficult to make desired changes happen and could have been an interesting issue to explore in terms of how clients can have a sense of agency within the constraints of their own personal control that may be present. However, it was not something that I encountered with the clients in this research. Millie did express challenges in her family life and her relationship with her mum. However, as she recognised what she would be doing when she was less stressed, she was able to address this by noticing that she would be spending more time with her mum in the evenings talking and watching television together, which would make her feel supported by her mum. This addressed the tension between challenges in family life and personal control over change, however it was confronted in a minor way. I wonder how the findings may change if the presenting issues were more severe, or more outside of the client's control. For example, with family, bullying, or safety concerns as these are situations where the counsellor may need to assert more control in the situation and could be interesting to explore how the client has agency through more challenging situations like these.

A common methodological practice in qualitative and narrative research is to give clients the opportunity to critique and comment on the findings and therefore make changes to them, so they more accurately reflect the stories they want to share (Harrison, MacGibbon & Morton, 2011). Through the process of consultation, this would have provided the clients with the opportunity to communicate their views on the data and how I had reconstructed their stories. It would have also enabled clients to make adjustments to words, phrases and emphases that I had presented (Baxter & Jack, 2008). However, due to the school year ending around the time I was analysing and writing up the findings and the school email addresses the participants provided closing due to them finishing up at the school, meant that I did not have the time or opportunity to carry out this process. This could have strengthened the findings of the research and enabled it to reflect the clients' stories in ways that honour their voice more fully.

Directions for Further Research

This research involved working with adolescents who were of a similar age, gender, ethnicity and stage in their life. They were all female, New Zealand European high school students between the ages of 15 and 18. The recruitment process involved students responding to an email request for volunteers to participate in the research so I had anticipated to have some more diversity in the participants, however I did not. Research on agency is mostly focused on adults (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013) so further research into the topic of agency could be carried out with adolescents who have more diverse personal characteristics of age, gender and ethnicity, or more challenging presenting problems. Some possible contexts for this research on personal agency may include working with disengaged youth, or adolescents with more complex issues that involve factors outside of their control and how they experience agency despite those challenges. This would need to use different recruitment processes to what I had used in this research, due to the limitations previously described.

These findings could provide greater understandings of agency and how it connects more broadly to diverse people and issues, especially how clients experience agency within themselves personally, despite many factors in their situations being outside of their control.

Conclusion

This practice-based research provides a small glimpse into how agency and strengths are co-constructed with adolescent clients through solution-focused counselling. It provides insights into this process from the experiences of both the clients and the counsellor. Findings which were generated from the data highlight that the solution-focused approach supports agency and is a powerful mechanism for enhancing therapeutic outcomes both as a result of counselling and within the clients' lives outside of counselling. For example, as clients' language their preferred identity and preferred future, this supports their understanding of how they connect with others for support and what resources and strengths they have to help them work towards their goals. These connections and understandings are enabled by the flexible and adaptable solution-focused approach to counselling that values a client-led process which is focused around the client and puts them in the driver's seat of their life. This in itself supports and implicitly communicates belief, strengths and agency, and further enhances the outcomes and process of agency.

This study makes a valuable contribution to the literature, adding a within session process of enhancing agency and strengths between the client and the counsellor, when working towards client goals. This adds adolescent in session voice to a body of research on agency that is largely focused on adults, and retrospective accounts of counselling.

The stories and findings developed from the data analysis will hopefully inform practitioners about specific parts of the solution-focused approach that enhanced client agency and strengths, as well as subsequent therapeutic outcomes. It may draw attention to parts of the

solution-focused approach in new ways, for practitioners to gain a more in-depth understanding of how to support client agency and strengths. Working effectively in these areas will support clients to experience enhanced agency through increased self-belief of their strengths, skills and resources that they have and can use to work towards their goals and preferred future and sense of identity.

REFERENCES

Allen, B. J. (2005). Social Constructionism. In S. May, & D. K. Mumby, *Engaging Organizational Communication Theory and Research: Multiple Perspectives* (pp. 35-51). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Anderson, H., & Goolishian, H. (1992). The Client is the Expert: A Not Knowing Approach to Therapy. In S. McNamee, & K. J. Gergen, *Therapy As Social Construction* (pp. 25-39). London: SAGE Publications.

Bager-Charleson, S. (2014). *Doing Practice-Based Research in Therapy: A Reflexive Approach.* London: SAGE Publications.

Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American Psychologist, 37*(2), 122-147.

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Bandura, A. (1989). Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory. *American Psychologist, 44*(9), 1175-1184.

Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a Psychology of Human Agency. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 1*(2), 164-180.

Barkham, M., Hardy, G. E., & Mellor-Clark, J. (2010). *Developing and Delivering Practice-Based Evidence : A Guide for the Psychological Therapies.* West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.

Bateman, J., & Milner, J. (2011). *Working with Children and Teenagers Using Solution Focused Approaches: Enabling Children to Overcome Challenges and Achieve Their Potential.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers. *The Qualitative Report, 13*(4), 544-559.

Bera, W. (2010). *Narragrams: Visualizing narrative therapy* (1st ed.). Minneapolis: Kenwood Center Publications.

Berg, I. K., & De Jong, P. (1996). Solution-building conversations: Co-constructing a sense of competence with clients. *Families in Society, 77*(6), 376-391.

Berg, I. K., & Miller, S. D. (1992). *Working with the problem drinker: A solution-focused approach.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Berg, I. K., & Steiner, T. (2003). *Children's Solution Work.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Besley, T. (2002). Over forty years of guidance counselling: Specialist teachers in New Zealand secondary schools 1959-2001. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education, 11*, 275-302.

Bidwell, D. R. (2000). Hope and possibility: The theology of culture inherent to solution-focused brief therapy. *American Journal of Pastoral Counseling, 3*(1), 3-21.

Binder, P.-E., Moltu, C., Hummelsund, D., Sagen, S. H., & Holgersen, H. (2011). Meeting an adult ally on the way out into the world: Adolescent patients' experiences of useful psychotherapeutic ways of working at an age when independence really matters. *Psychotherapy Research, 21*(5), 554-566.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Bohart, A. C., & Tallman, K. (2010). Clients: The neglected common factor in psychotherapy. In B. L. Duncan, S. D. Miller, B. E. Wampold, & M. A. Hubble, *The heart and soul of change: Delivering what works in therapy* (2nd ed., pp. 83-111). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

Bold, C. (2012). *Using Narrative in Research.* London: SAGE Publications.

Bozkurt, T. (2014). New Horizons in Education: Positive Education and Emerging Leadership Roles of Counselors. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Science, 140*, 452-461.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.

Brott, P. E. (2001). The Storied Approach: A Postmodern Perspective for Career Counseling. *The Career Development Quarterly, 49*(4), 304-313.

Brummert Lennings, H. I., & Bussey, K. (2017). Personal agency in children: Assessing children's coping self-efficacy in the context of parental conflict. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 41*(3), 432–443.

Bruner, J. S. (1990). *Acts of Meaning.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Burr, V. (1995). *An Introduction to Social Constructionism.* London: Routledge.

Butler, W. R., & Powers, K. V. (1996). Solution-Focused Grief Therapy. In S. D. Miller, M. A. Hubble, & B. L. Duncan, *Handbook of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy* (pp. 228-247). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Clandinin, J. D., & Connelly, M. F. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Cleary, T. J., & Zimmerman, B. J. (2004). Self-regulation empowerment program: A school-based program to enhance self-regulated and self-motivated cycles of student learning. *Psychology in the Schools, 41*, 537-550.

Cohn, M. A., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2009). Positive Emotions. In S. J. Lopez, & J. R. Snyder, *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (pp. 13-23). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Corcoran, J. (1998). Solution-Focused Practice with Middle and High School At-Risk Youths. *Social Work in Education, 20*(4), 232-243.

Corcoran, J. (2005). *Building strengths and skills: a collaborative approach to working with clients.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Craig, C., & Huber, J. (2007). Relational Reverberations: Shaping and Reshaping Narrative Inquiries in the Midst of Storied Lives and Contexts. In D. J. Clandinin, *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology* (pp. 251-279). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Designs.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Crocket, K. (2011). Electronic Recording of Counselling Conversations. In K. Crocket, M. Agee, & S. Cornforth, *Ethics in Practice: A Guide for Counsellors* (pp. 180-183). Wellington: Dunmore Publishing.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process.* NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

Crowe, A. (2014). Guidance and Counseling in Aotearoa, New Zealand, Secondary Schools: Revisiting the Issues. *Journal of Asia Pacific Counseling, 4*(2), 1999-215.

Darawsheh, W., & Stanley, M. (2014). Reflexivity in research: Promoting rigour, reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Therapy And Rehabilitation, 21*(12), 560-568.

Davis, T. E., & Osborn, C. J. (2000). *The Solution-Focused School Counselor.* Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis.

De Jong, P., & Berg, I. K. (2013). *Interviewing For Solutions.* Boston: Brooks/Cole.

De Jong, P., & Miller, S. D. (1995). How to Interview for Client Strengths. *Social Work, 40*(6), 729-736.

de Shazer, S. (1985). *Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy.* New York: W.W. Norton.

de Shazer, S. (1988). *Clues: Investigating Solutions in Brief Therapy.* Ontario: Penguin Books.

de Shazer, S., Berg, I. K., Lipchik, E., Nunnally, E., Molnar, A., Gingerich, W., & Weiner-Davis, M. (1986). Brief Therapy: Focused Solution Development. *Family Process, 25*(2), 207-221.

Du Plock, S. (2004). What Do We Mean When We Use The Word 'Research'? *Existential Analysis, 15*(1), 29-37.

Education Review Office. (2013). *Improving Guidance and Counselling for Students in Secondary Schools.* Retrieved January 21, 2020, from Education Review Office:

https://www.ero.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Improving-Guidance-and-Counselling-for-

Students-in-Secondary-Schools-December-2013.pdf

Etherington, K. (2013). *Narrative Approaches to Case Studies.* Retrieved January 16, 2020,

from Keele University:

https://www.keele.ac.uk/media/keeleuniversity/facnatsci/schpsych/documents/couns

elling/conference/5thannual/NarrativeApproachestoCaseStudies.pdf

Ethical Research Involving Children. (2019). *Ethical Guidance.* Retrieved January 21, 2020,

from Ethical Research Involving Children: https://childethics.com/ethical-guidance/

Evans, K. (2007). Concepts of bounded agency in education, work, and the personal lives of

young adults. *International Journal of Psychology, 42*(2), 85-93.

Finlay, L. (2008). Reflecting on 'Reflective Practice'. *The Open University*, 1-27.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2011). Case Study. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of

Qualitative Research* (4th ed., pp. 301-316). London: SAGE Publications.

Gehart, D. R. (2012). *Mindfulness and Acceptance in Couple and Family Therapy.* New

York: Springer.

Gibson, K., & Cartwright, C. (2013). Agency in Young Clients' Narratives of Counseling: It's

Whatever You Want to Make of It. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 60*(3), 340-

352.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration.*

Berkeley: University of California Press.

Grant, L., & Usher, R. (2011). The whiteboard as a co-therapist: Narrative conversations in a

generalist counselling setting. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy &

Community Work*(4), 9-15.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research. In N. K.

Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 105-117). Thousand

Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Hanton, P. (2011). *Skills in Solution Focused Brief Counselling & Psychotherapy.* London:

SAGE Publications.

Hare-Mustin, R., & Marecek, J. (1994). Asking the Right Questions: Feminist Psychology and Sex Differences. *Feminism and Psychology, 4*, 531-537.

Harrison, J., MacGibbon, L., & Morton, M. (2001). Regimes of Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research: The Rigours of Reciprocity. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 323-345.

Hay, I. (2005). Facilitating Children's Self-Concept: A Rationale and Evaluative Study. *Australian Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 15*(1), 60-67.

Hennink, M. M., Hutter, I., & Bailey, A. (2011). *Qualitative Research Methods.* London: SAGE Publications.

Hermansson, G. L., & Webb, S. B. (1993). Guidance and counselling in New Zealand: Weathering a decade of transformation. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 16*, 213-227.

Hoffman, L. (1992). Constructing the Theoretical Context: A Reflexive Stance for Family Therapy. In S. McNamee, & K. J. Gergen, *Therapy As Social Construction* (pp. 7-24). London: SAGE Publications.

Hopson, L. M., & Kim, J. S. (2004). A Solution-Focused Approach to Crisis Intervention with Adolescents. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work, 1*(2/3), 93-110.

Jones-Smith, E. (2016). *Theories of Counselling and Psychotherapy: An Integrative Approach.* London: SAGE Publications.

Kiecolt, K. J., & Mabry, J. B. (2000). Agency in young adulthood: Intentional self-change among college students. *Advances in Life Course Research, 5*, 181-205.

King, P. (2017). *Tools for Effective Therapy with Children and Families: A Solution-Focused Approach.* New York: Routledge.

Langridge, D. (2007). *Phenomenological Psychology.* Harlow: Pearson.

Larson, R. W., & Angus, R. M. (2011). Adolescents' Development of Skills for Agency in Youth Programs: Learning to Think Strategically. *Child Development, 82*(1), 277-294.

Layder, D. (2007). Self-Identity and Personhood in Social Analysis: The Inadequacies of Postmodernism and Social Constructionism. In J. Powell, & T. Owen, *Reconstructing Postmodernism: Critical Debates* (pp. 3-14). New York: Nova Science Publishers.

Lethem, J. (2002). Brief Solution Focused Therapy. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 7*(4), 189-192.

Lichtman, M. (2013). *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis, and Interpretation.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Lipchik, E., Derks, J., LaCourt, M., & Nunnally, E. (2012). The Evolution of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. In C. Franklin, T. S. Trepper, W. J. Gingerich, & E. E. McCollum, *Solution-Focused Brief Therapy: A Handbook of Evidence-Based Practice* (pp. 3-19). New York: Oxford University Press.

McCanny, G. (2009, November 10). *Solution focused brief therapy.* Retrieved January 30, 2020, from Counselling Directory: https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/memberarticles/solution-focused-brief-therapy

McLeod, J. (2010). *Case Study Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy.* London: SAGE Publications.

McLeod, J. (2011). *Qualitative Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE Publications.

McLeod, J. (2012). Systematic Case Study Research: A Practice-Oriented Introduction to Building an Evidence Base for Counselling and Psychotherapy. *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research, 11*(1), 1-10.

McLeod, J. (2013). *An Introduction to Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy.* London: SAGE.

Miller, G. (2008). The man behind the mirror behind the mirror at BTFC. *InterAction: The Journal of Solution Focus in Organisations, 1*(1), 78-88.

Miller, S. D., Duncan, B. L., Brown, J., Sparks, J. A., & Claud, D. A. (2003). The Outcome Rating Scale: A Preliminary Study of the Reliability, Validity, and Feasibility of a Brief Visual Analog Measure. *Journal of Brief Therapy, 2*(2), 91-100.

Minohara, R., Wen, W., Hamasaki, S., Maeda, T., Kato, M., Yamakawa, H., Yamashita, A., Asama, H. (2016). Strength of Intentional Effort Enhances the Sense of Agency. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*:1165.

Moore, J. W. (2016, August 29). What Is the Sense of Agency and Why Does it Matter? *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*:1272.

Morton, M. H., & Montgomery, P. (2013). Youth Empowerment Programs for Improving Adolescents' Self-Efficacy and Self-Esteem: A Systematic Review. *Research on Social Work Practice, 23*(1), 22-33.

Murphy, J. (1996). Solution-Focused Brief Therapy in the School. In S. D. Miller, M. A. Hubble, & B. L. Duncan, *Handbook of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy* (pp. 184-204). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

New Zealand Association of Counsellors. (2016). *Code of Ethics.* Retrieved January 21, 2020, from https://www.nzac.org.nz/ethics/code-of-ethics/

O'Connell, B. (2012). *Solution-Focused Therapy* (3rd ed.). London: SAGE Publications.

O'Hanlon, W., & Weiner-Davis, M. (1989). *In Search of Solution.* New York: W. W. Norton.

Parsons, R. D. (2009). *Thinking and Acting Like a Solution-Focused School Counsellor.* Thousand Oaks: Corwin.

Petersen, C., & Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook of Classification.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peterson, C., & Park, N. (2009). Classifying and Measuring Strengths of Character. In S. J. Lopez, & J. R. Snyder, *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (pp. 25-33). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pistrang, N., & Barker, C. (2010). Scientific, Practical and Personal Dimensions in Selecting Qualitative Methods. In M. Barkham, G. Hardy, & J. Mellor-Clark, *Developing and Delivering Practice-Based Evidence: A Guide for Psychological Therapies* (pp. 65-90). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Polkinghorne, D. (1995). Narrative Configuration in Qualitative Analysis. In R. W. Amos Hatch, *Life History and Narrative* (pp. 5-23). London: The Falmer Press.

Polkinghorne, D. (2005). Language and Meaning: Data Collection in Qualitative Research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 137-145.

Rennie, D. L. (1994). Human science and counseling psychology: Closing the gap between research and practice. *Counseling and Psychology Quarterly, 7*(3), 235-250.

Rennie, D. L. (2000). Aspects of the Client's Conscious Control of the Psychotherapeutic Process. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration, 10*(2), 151-167.

Riessman, C. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Riessman, C., & Speedy, J. (2007). Narrative Inquiry in the Psychotherapy Professions: A Critical Review. In D. J. Clandinin, *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology* (pp. 426-456). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Sabalauskas, K. L., Ortolani, C. L., & McCall, M. J. (2014). Moving from pathology to possibility: Integrating strengths-based interventions in child welfare provision. *Child Care in Practice, 20*(1), 120-134.

Saleebey, D. (1992). *The strengths perspective in social work practice* (2nd ed.). Longman.

Saleebey, D. (2008). Commentary on the Strengths Perspective and Potential Applications in School Counseling. *Professional School Counseling, 12*(2), 68-75.

Savin-Baden, M., & Major, C. H. (2013). *Qualitative Research: The Essential Guide to Theory and Practice.* London: Routledge.

Shennan, G. (2014). *Solution-Focused Practise: Effective Communication to Facilitate Change.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sparks, J., Duncan, B. L., & Miller, S. D. (2007). Common factors and the uncommon heroism of youth. *Psychotherapy in Australia, 13*(2), 34-43.

St Lukes Innovative Resources. (2008). *Strength Cards*. Retrieved January 2020, from Innovative Resources: https://innovativeresources.org/resources/card-sets/strength-cards/

St Pierre, E. A. (2011). Post Qualitative Research: The Critique and the Coming After. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 611-625). London: SAGE Publications.

Stake, R. E. (2010). *Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work.* New York: Guilford Press.

Steinberg, L. (2007). Risk Taking in Adolescence: New Perspectives from Brain and Behavioral Science. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 16*(2), 55-59.

Tarragona, M. (2008). Postmodern/Poststructuralist Therapy . In J. L. Lebow, *Twenty-First Century Psychotherapies: Contemporary Approaches to Theory and Practice* (pp. 167-205). New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Taylor, S., Bogdan, R., & DeVault, M. (2016). *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource.* New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Thomas, F. (2013). *Solution-Focused Supervision : A Resource-Oriented Approach to Developing Clinical Expertise.* New York: Springer.

von der Lippe, A. L., Oddli, H. W., & Halvorsen, M. S. (2019). Therapist strategies early in therapy associated with good or poor outcomes among clients with low proactive agency. *Psychotherapy Research, 29*(3), 383-402.

Walter, J., & Peller, J. (1996). Rethinking our Assumptions: Assumption Anew in a Postmodern World. In S. Miller, M. A. Hubble, & B. Duncan, *Handbook of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy* (pp. 17-26). CA: Brooks/Cole.

Wampold, B. E., Ahn, H., & Coleman, H. L. (2001). Medical model as metaphor: Old habits die hard. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 48*(3), 268-273.

Webster, L., & Mertova, P. (2007). *Using Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method: An Introduction to Using Critical Event Narrative Analysis in Research on Learning and Teaching.* New York: Routledge.

Welfare, L. E., Farmer, L. B., & Lile, J. J. (2013). Empirical Evidence for the Importance of Conceptualizing Client Strengths. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, 52*(2), 146-163.

Winston, C. N. (2015). Points of Convergence and Divergence Between Existential and

    Humanistic Psychology: A Few Observations. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 43*, 40-

    53.

Wosket, V. (1999). *The Therapeutic Use of Self: Counselling Practice, Research and*

    Supervision. London: Routledge.

Young, K. (2005). An Interview with Eve Lipchik: Expanding Solution-Focused Thinking.

    Journal of Systemic Therapies, 24(1), 67-74.

Zimmerman, B. J., & Cleary, T. J. (2006). Adolescents' Development of Personal Agency:

    The Role of Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Self-Regulatory Skill. In T. Urdan, & F. Pajares,

    Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Adolescents (pp. 45-69). Greenwich: Information Age

    Publishing.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethics Approval

UC
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY
Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha
CHRISTCHURCH NEW ZEALAND

HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Rebecca Robinson
Telephone: +64 03 369 4588, Extn 94588
Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

Ref: 2019/41/ERHEC

8 August 2019

Georgina Cuttance
Health Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Georgina

Thank you for providing the revised documents in support of your application to the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee. I am very pleased to inform you that your research proposal *"I've Got This": Exploring Adolescents' Sense of Agency Through Co-Constructing Their Strengths in Solution-Focused Counselling"* has been granted ethical approval.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your emails of 18th July and 6th August 2019, **and the following:**

- *Please use checkboxes for the Consent Forms as per the ERHEC template – participants need to consent/not consent to each point individually.*

Should circumstances relevant to this current application change you are required to reapply for ethical approval.

If you have any questions regarding this approval, please let me know.

We wish you well for your research.

Yours sincerely

pp *R. Robinson*

Dr Patrick Shepherd
Chair
Educational Research Human Ethics Committee

Please note that ethical approval relates only to the ethical elements of the relationship between the researcher, research participants and other stakeholders. The granting of approval by the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee should not be interpreted as comment on the methodology, legality, value or any other matters relating to this research.

F E S

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Poster

VOLUNTEERS FOR COUNSELLING RESEARCH

My name is Georgina Cuttance and I am a counsellor at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮ from the University of Canterbury. I am doing a research project which will be looking at how adolescents experience counselling that builds on their strengths for an increased sense of belief in their abilities to make change happen.

Do you have something that you want to make better in your life?

RELATIONSHIPS	**STRESS**	**MOTIVATION**
ANXIETY **GRIEF**	**CHANGE**	**SCHOOL**

What will this research project involve?

If you choose to participate in this research project, it will involve coming to a few counselling sessions and talking about changes you want to make happen in your life. I am looking at my own counselling practice and how I support you to believe in your own abilities to make change happen.

Participants will be required to:

- Attend one introductory meeting for about 10 minutes with me so I can explain the research project and what will be involved if you choose to participate.
- Attend up to 3 counselling sessions where you will be able to have the opportunity to talk about things you want to change and make better in your life.
- Sessions will be video recorded
- Gain consent from your caregivers to participate

This will be confidential and anonymous- your identity will be kept anonymous in any publications.

If interested, please send an email to ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

160

Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Email

Kia ora koutou,

My name is Georgina Cuttance and I am a counsellor here at ███████████ ████. I am also a student at the University of Canterbury. As part of my studies, I am doing a research project to look at my counselling practice.

My research will be looking at how adolescents experience counselling that builds on their strengths, resources and skills for an increased sense of belief in their abilities to make change happen.

I would like to invite students from year 9-13 to participate in this research. For more information about the project, have a look at the poster attached to this email. This outlines what participating in this research project will involve.

If you are interested in participating in this project, or to hear more about it, please send me an email to organise a time to meet up at school to talk about it. I am at school on Mondays and Wednesdays.

Thank you for your consideration to participate in this project,
Georgina

Appendix D: Information and Consent Forms

Georgina Cuttance

▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

<div align="center">

Information for participants

"I can do it": Exploring the co-construction of agency through solution-focused counselling with adolescents

</div>

My name is Georgina Cuttance and I am working as a counsellor at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. I am also a student from the University of Canterbury currently studying towards a Master of Counselling. As part of my studies, I will be doing some counselling research which will be looking at how people experience counselling that builds on their strengths, skills and resources for an increased sense of personal agency.

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

I would like to invite you to participate in this research. If you choose to participate, it will involve the following:

- Attend a brief meeting with me to talk about what this research project is about, what participating in this research will involve, and to talk about the counselling process.
- Gain parent/caregiver consent for you to participate in the research.
- Participate in up to three counselling sessions for up to 50 minutes, where you can talk about things that you want to be different in your life. Sessions will be video recorded.
- At the end of each session, there will be a short interview (up to 10 minutes). This will ask questions like: What moments in the session helped you to become more aware of your strengths? Has anything in the session made a difference to your belief in yourself to make change happen? How did the counsellor convey that they believed in your strengths, skills and resources to make change happen? What difference did talking about strengths have for your confidence in your abilities to make change happen?

Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any point if you change your mind. You may continue counselling with me or another counsellor after withdrawing or when the research has finished. If you choose to withdraw, you can do so by letting me know in person or via email and the data pertaining to you will be destroyed.

All information about you will be kept confidential and anonymous. Your identity will be protected by using a pseudonym for your name and any details that could identify you or your school will be changed too. At times, I may 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 (recordings, counsellor notes and transcripts), will be stored securely in a password protected file on a password protected computer, and on the UC network. Data will also be stored in locked facilities at school and my home. Data will be destroyed after five years, as required by the University of Canterbury.

The findings from the study will be available as the thesis in the University of Canterbury library. I may also present findings from my study at a local counselling conference and publish the findings in a journal. The results may be useful for other counsellors by providing them with new understandings of how people may experience a sense of agency through counselling that builds on their strengths, skills and resources. There will be no identifying information in

the results. A copy of the research can be provided to you by email. Please indicate on the consent form if you would like to receive a summary of results of the project.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you are able to contact me using the details provided above, or my university supervisor Shanee Barraclough. Their contact details are provided below.

Shanee Barraclough: ███████████████████████████████

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

If you are willing to participate in this study, please discuss this with your parents/caregivers as they also need to give consent for you to participate.

Please return the consent form in the envelope provided to me in the Guidance Department on Mondays or Wednesdays.

Thank you for considering participating in this research.

Georgina Cuttance

Georgina Cuttance
████████████████████

<div align="right">
UC 🛡
UNIVERSITY OF
CANTERBURY
Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha
CHRISTCHURCH NEW ZEALAND
</div>

Consent form for participants

"I can do it": Exploring the co-construction of agency through solution-focused counselling with adolescents

- I have been given a full explanation of this project and have been given an opportunity to ask questions.

- I understand what will be required of me if I agree to take part in this project.

- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any stage without penalty, and, that any information and data will be destroyed.

- I understand that counselling sessions will be recorded and that data will be stored securely in a password protected file on a password protected computer, and on the UC network. Data will also be locked facilities at the school and researcher's home and will be destroyed after five years.

- 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 or presentation.

- I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC library, and may be presented at conferences or in journals.

- I understand that I can receive a summary of the results of the study. Please indicate below if you would like to receive a summary of the results, and provide your email address for the report to be sent to.

- I understand that I can contact the researcher, (details above), or her supervisor, Shanee Barraclough: ████████████████████████████. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

- I understand that if I require further information I can contact the researcher, Georgina Cuttance.

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

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

I would like a summary of the results sent to me via email: YES / NO (please circle)

Email: _____

Please read and complete this consent form and then return it to Georgina Cuttance in the Guidance Department on a Monday or Wednesday in the envelope provided.

Georgina Cuttance

████████████████████████████

Information for parents/whanau/caregivers

"I can do it": Exploring the co-construction of agency through solution-focused counselling with adolescents

Dear parents/whanau/caregivers,

My name is Georgina Cuttance and I am working as a counsellor at ████████████████. I am also a student from the University of Canterbury currently studying towards a Master of Counselling. As part of my studies, I will be doing some counselling research which will be looking at how people experience counselling that builds on their strengths, skills and resources for an increased sense of personal agency.

Coming to counselling can help someone 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 me to talk about what this research project is about, what participating in this research will involve, and to talk about the counselling process.
- Participate in up to three counselling sessions for up to 50 minutes, where they can talk about things they want to be different in their life. Sessions will be video recorded.
- At the end of each session, there will be a short interview (up to 10 minutes). This will ask questions like: What moments in the session helped you to become more aware of your strengths? Has anything in the session made a difference to your belief in yourself to make change happen? How did the counsellor convey that they believed in your strengths, skills and resources to make change happen? What difference did talking about strengths have for your confidence in your abilities to make change happen?

Participation is voluntary and students can withdraw at any point if they change their mind. Students may continue counselling with me or another counsellor after they withdraw or the research has finished. If a student chooses to withdraw, they can do so by letting me know in person or via email, and the data pertaining to them will be destroyed.

All information about students will be kept confidential and anonymous. Their identity will be protected by using a pseudonym for their name and any details that could identify them or their school will be changed too. At times, I may 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 (recordings, counsellor notes and transcripts), will be stored securely in a password protected file on a password protected computer, and on the UC network. Data will also be stored in locked facilities at school and my home. Data will be destroyed after five years, as required by the University of Canterbury.

The findings from the study will be available as the thesis in the University of Canterbury library. I may also present findings from my study at a local counselling conference and publish the findings in a journal. The results may be useful for other counsellors by providing them with new understandings of how people may experience a sense of agency through counselling that builds on their strengths, skills and resources. There will be no identifying information in the results. A summary of the results is offered to be provided to participants by email.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you are able to contact me on my details provided above, or my university supervisor Shanee Barraclough. Her contact details are provided below.

Shanee Barraclough: ████████████████████████████████████

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

Through this process, your child will provided with the utmost of care with autonomy and respect. I will also be provided with professional support from my supervisors for my roles as both a counsellor and throughout the duration of working together with your child.

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

Thank you for considering this request.

Georgina Cuttance

Georgina Cuttance

███████████████████

Consent form for parents/whanau/caregivers

"I can do it": Exploring the co-construction of agency through solution-focused counselling with adolescents

- 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 they agree to take part in the research.

- I understand that participation is voluntary and that my child can withdraw at any time without penalty, and, that any information and data will be destroyed.

- I understand that counselling sessions will be recorded and that data will be stored securely in a password protected file on a password protected computer, and on the UC network. Data will also be locked facilities at the school and 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 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 or presentation.

- I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC library, and may be presented at conferences or in journals.

- I understand that my child can receive a summary of the results of the study.

- I understand that I can contact the researcher, (details above), or her supervisor, Shanee Barraclough: ████████████████████████████████████. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Educational Research 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: _____

Email: _____

Child's name: _____

Please return this consent form in the sealed envelope to Georgina Cuttance in the Guidance Department on a Monday or Wednesday.

Georgina Cuttance
████████████████████████

"I can do it": Exploring the co-construction of agency through solution-focused counselling with adolescents

Dear ████████

As previously discussed, I would like to conduct some counselling research at ████████████ ████████ as part of my studies towards a Master of Counselling degree at the University of Canterbury. The research investigates my own practice as a counsellor working with adolescents. I will be looking at how people experience counselling that builds on their strengths, skills and resources for an increased sense of personal agency. This challenges the societal construct of counselling providing clients with advice, which many adolescents expect from counselling. My qualitative, practice-based, case study research will take an in-depth look at how strengths are co-constructed in a collaborative way between the counsellor and client, with the aim of understanding how this can bring about an increased sense of personal agency in a client's life.

Students will be invited to volunteer as participants in this study. I hope to recruit up to four students. Participants will be required to commit to the following:

- Attend a brief meeting with me to talk about what this research project is about, what participating in this research will involve, and to talk about the counselling process.
- Participate in up to three counselling sessions for up to 50 minutes, where they can talk about things they want to be different in their life. Sessions will be video recorded.
- At the end of each session, there will be a short interview (up to 10 minutes). This will ask questions like: What moments in the session helped you to become more aware of your strengths? Has anything in the session made a difference to your belief in yourself to make change happen? How did the counsellor convey that they believed in your strengths, skills and resources to make change happen? What difference did talking about strengths have for your confidence in your abilities to make change happen?

Participation is voluntary and students can withdraw at any point if they change their mind. Students may continue counselling with me or another counsellor after they have withdrawn or the research has finished. If a student chooses to withdraw, they can do so by letting me know in person or via email, and the data pertaining to them will be deleted. You also have the right to withdraw the school from the research and all data pertaining to the project will be destroyed.

All information about students will be kept confidential and anonymous. Students' identity will be protected by using a pseudonym for their name and any details that could identify them or their school will be changed too. At times, I may 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 (recordings, counsellor notes and transcripts), will be stored securely in a password protected file on a password protected computer, and on the UC network. Data will also be stored in locked facilities at school and my home. Data will be destroyed after five years, as required by the University of Canterbury.

The findings from the study will be available as the thesis in the University of Canterbury library. I may also present findings from my study at a local counselling conference and publish the findings in a journal. The results may be useful for other counsellors by providing them with new understandings of how people may experience a sense of agency through counselling that builds

on their strengths, skills and resources. There will be no identifying information in the results. A summary of the results of the project will be provided offered to be provided to you and the participants by email.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you are able to contact me on my details provided above, or my university supervisor Shanee Barraclough. Her contact details are provided below.

Shanee Barraclough: ████████████████████████████████████

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

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Georgina Cuttance

Georgina Cuttance

███████████████████████

Consent form for Principal

"I can do it": Exploring the co-construction of agency through solution-focused counselling with adolescents

- 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 students if they agree to take part in the 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.

- I understand that counselling sessions will be recorded and that data will be stored securely in a password protected file on a password protected computer, and on the UC network. Data will also be locked facilities at the school and 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 the information will be kept confidential by the researcher and that the identity of students and the school will be kept anonymous in any publication or presentation.

- I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC library, and may be presented at conferences or in journals.

- I understand that participants and myself will be offered to receive a summary of the results of the study. Please indicate below if you would like to receive a summary of the results, and provide your email address for the report to be sent to.

- I understand that I can contact the researcher, (details above), or her supervisor, Shanee Barraclough: ████████████████████████████████████. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Educational Research 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 at school.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

I would like a summary of the results sent to me via email: YES / NO (please circle)

Email: _____