What does self-identity have to do with my development as a counsellor?

The heuristic research described here was undertaken during the second year of a Masters' programme in psychotherapeutic practice. The qualitative research method followed was developed by Clark Moustakas who said of the process "I am creating a story that portrays the qualities, meanings, and essences of universally unique experiences" (Moustakas, 1990, p.13). In essence, this method involves the author (who is both researcher and participant), looking inwards in order to derive new knowledge from the exploration of a phenomenon. Given its reliance on the researcher's *interpretation* of phenomena, this method lies within the philosophical realm of hermeneutics (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2002). A more specific philosophical stance that seems to have influenced the development of the heuristic method is Michael Polanyi's argument that within any scientific enquiry there is a reliance on personal knowledge (Given, 2008). Furthermore, Moustakas (1990, p.8) credits Polanyi with the concepts of *tacit knowledge*, *intuition* and *indwelling* – all integral features of the method. In its influences and design the method has strong connections with psychotherapy. Moustakas cites Gendlin, Rogers and Buber as formative figures and he applied the heuristic method to the field of psychotherapy. In fact he went on to create the *heuristic approach* in psychotherapy (Moustakas, 1990). The research approach seems therefore to sit well with the investigation of phenomena both in general and in their relation to psychotherapy.

What is self-identity? What does it matter? Like other notions of the self; self-worth, self-esteem (the list is a long one), self-identity has no precise, objective meaning, there is likely no part of the brain or body which holds this concept yet, it is held within, it seems to me, can be altered and can shape our lives. Definitions of the concept vary, though the notion of "how we see ourselves", would surely be common to all. In a sense, these definitions do not matter at this stage. I chose 'self-identity' as the closest label in the 'external' world of language to something I felt and wished to explore. I then began to examine this concept, not by reading others' ideas but by exploring the 'internal' world of the self. Only at a later stage did I compare what meaning I derived from this term with others' conceptualisations. In order to answer the title question I address the intermediate questions: "What does self-identity have

to do with me?" and "What can I say that is new about self-identity?" My 'hunch' on beginning this research was that 'self-identity' in some form might lie behind my happiness and effectiveness in the world and that this may teach me something new about this concept.

Literature Review

The purpose of this review is firstly to set the research in context by describing what is generally meant by the term 'self-identity' and secondly, to serve as a group of ideas to inform the critical analysis of any new findings. This analysis will be presented separately to the review, after the data has been synthesised and presented. Self-identity is composed of two terms, both of which have independent meanings and bodies of literature. Literature devoted exclusively to the composite term was found to be sparse and so the discussion here includes ideas written about both terms but which seem to have particular relevance to 'self-identity'.

Within the field of psychology, *identity theory* is concerned with the meanings that people attach to their roles within society. According to Stryker and Burke (2000) this theory has its roots in Mead's 1934 work which they summarise as "society shapes self shapes social behaviour". The influence of this idea can be seen in their definition of *identity*, as those "parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies." (ibid., p.284). The focus on the self in this definition means that this could easily be a definition of the term 'self-identity'. The picture painted here is of fixed societal roles ('employee', 'teacher', 'parent') being 'imported' to form component parts of the self. A second conceptualisation of identity is provided by Turner's 'self-categorization theory' (Gove and Watt, 2004). According to this model, "we take on identities appropriate to the social categories with which we identify" (ibid., p.47). The language here is somewhat different to that used by Stryker and Burke, with 'social categories' replacing 'roles', but the idea that our 'internal' identity is the result of our identifying with an 'external' template seems common to both theories.

A third body of theory which teaches us about the role of self-identity is the multicultural counselling movement (see Lago (2011), Ponterotto *et al* (2001)). Writing in this tradition, Proctor (2011) argues that differences in identity within society lead to

real differences in power. I feel that an important element of this view of identity is that it gives a sense of the impact, for better or ill, that identity can have on a person's life and well-being: This provides an important link between self-identity and the emotional self. A second and important characteristic of this approach to identity, is that unlike the models described above, identity can be seen as being forced on a person by society rather than being chosen by them. For example, the involuntary 'role' of belonging to a minority group in society can lead to disadvantage due to others' prejudice towards this identity.

In Rogers (1959), the author sets out his theory of personality as well as both human psychological growth and a theory of psychotherapy. In this manuscript, the author gives the following definition of 'self', 'concept of self' and 'self-structure', which, given its precise almost legalistic nature, is best quoted in full: (ibid., p.200) "the organized consistent conceptual gestalt composed of perceptions of the characteristics of "I" or "me" and the perceptions of the relationships of the "I" or "me" to others and to various aspects of life, together with the values attached to these perceptions." The connection with Stryker and Burke's *identity* lies in the phrase "..and to various aspects of life". The relationship of the self with society is present here albeit as a component part of the definition. This concept is just part of the overall theory of psychological growth set out by Rogers and it is not the remit of this text to engage with this body of theory as a whole. Nevertheless, the definition given above seems significantly close to the research topic to be useful in the discussion below.

Methodology

The BACP (2016, Point 2) *Ethical Framework* contains the commitment that counsellors should ensure that their wellbeing "is sufficient to sustain the quality of the work". Since this study deals with the self and emotion, there is a potential for the researcher to become distressed and for this to impact on their work. I carried out the majority of this work in the evenings, after any counselling work. This meant that a night's rest separated research work from counselling work. In addition I discussed the fact that I was undertaking the research both in supervision and in personal therapy and I feel that these would have been places I could have taken any difficulties had

they arisen. These factors combined to make the process a safer and more ethical one.

Moustakas (1990) describes a heuristic research method consisting of six phases and it is this model which I have followed here. Around the time that I began this research I had undergone a change which felt positive but which I did not fully understand. The label I gave to this change – the term that seemed of most relevance, was 'self-identity' and so this seemed the natural topic to take as a starting point for research. This was my question of "personal challenge and puzzlement" (Moustakas, 1990, p.15) chosen during the 'initial engagement' phase. During 'immersion' I discovered that a large slice of everyday experiencing could be viewed through the lens of self-identity and that this became, to an extent, an unconscious process. Given the fairly large amount of data produced I found the 'incubation' phase, where the researcher is less obviously focused on the question but is open to the presence of *tacit knowledge* (ibid.), to be very beneficial to the internal processing of the material. During 'illumination' I became aware of tacit knowledge becoming fully formed knowledge (ibid.). However, I found that taking concrete steps to convey this knowledge to others, as during 'explication', challenged the clarity of these new ideas in a very useful and formative way. During the final phase of research, 'creative synthesis' I produced a piece of writing aimed at conveying my new awareness of the phenomenon as a cohesive body of new knowledge. This synthesis is presented here following a description of the data and its analysis.

Analysis

The entire data set takes the form of personal reflections and observations. Collected over a period of six weeks, these pieces of writing vary greatly in length and style. Some are short encapsulations of a particular thought, while others are more lengthy pieces of free-writing. The pieces also differ in their relationship to the topic; some are tightly bound to the subject of self-identity while others have only a loose connection. Producing this 'primary data' was a useful exercise in itself. The writing at times took unexpected turns or highlighted a part of self not previously considered. In this way it could be therapeutic and informative.

The thematic analysis was carried out as follows. A close reading of the data was carried out and a theme word written alongside the relevant passage. For example, the following passage from the raw data "*Strange touch of mood – low? Not exactly, a sort of melancholy or detached feeling*" was marked with '*detachment'* in the thematic analysis. Another example was "*I am...a Dad (slightly queasy), a brother (formless, not sure) a mathematician (that's ok)*". This passage was marked with '*simple statements'.* Carrying out this process for the entire data set resulted in a list of 38 such theme words. In order to make sense of this large number of themes, they were sorted into four groups: "identity", "self", "meta", and "theory". The first two of these accounted for the vast majority of themes, while the last two were much smaller categories. The first of these groups contained themes which had a direct connection to 'self-identity', the '*short statements*' theme was in this category as was '*non-verbal self-identity*'. The "self' category contained thoughts and feelings which were reflective, but which were not directly concerned with self-identity. Examples in this group included "joy (at experiencing present)", "physicality", and "extremes". In isolation, these words would be of little value but in the context of the research process, each carried a personal meaning connected with the original data.

The third thematic group was "meta", meaning thoughts and feelings about the process itself. I found that while creating the data, a certain amount of the reflection would fall within this category, for example I had concerns about privacy: "*I should write something that is uncomfortable, something I might be embarrassed for others to read. I would worry that others might read it.*". Also, curiosity about the process of self-examination: *"How to address oneself – addressing oneself as if another. Comforting self. Goading self."* The final group of themes were produced as a result of theorising about the material found, either on its own terms or by comparison with other literature – this from the data *"Reading Buber I was persuaded of the rightness of less"*. These last two categories are themselves characteristic of an analytical part of me – as well as recording thoughts and feelings I wanted immediately to examine them.

The experience of carrying out this research was at times frustrating but overall very rewarding. One sort of frustration was in having to produce writing at 'non-optimal' times, i.e. when tired, distracted or disinterested. On these occasions, the 'free-writing' method was invaluable since it is easy to begin (one can write *anything)* but seems

nevertheless to produce something interesting once the process 'takes hold'. Another sort of frustration lay in producing the *creative synthesis* which follows. As noted above, a fairly large amount of written data was deconstructed into 38 themes, which in turn were put into four groups. This meant that there was a large amount of material in the 'melting pot' and several attempts at 'synthesis' had to be discarded. The process was rewarding in two primary ways. Firstly, the whole project did, I feel, lead to some new understanding, both of myself and the topic. Secondly, in following this method and in seeing it unfold, I experienced a new way of learning, one which I could imagine using again.

Creative Synthesis

Begin with an example. My five year old self returned from my first football practice, wearing the full kit and full of enthusiasm. Suggestions that I should change into normal clothes were met with surprising opposition: "NO, I want to stay in it ALL DAY!". I hadn't just been kicking a football about, I'd been trying on a new identity and liked the way it felt. Something from 'out there' was being tested out as part of 'in here' and at that moment felt very important to me. Taking part in a team sport has obvious connotations of belonging and identity, but what happens when this experience is paired down a little, when it is reduced to speaking a simple phrase. What if I say: "I am a man"?

In its written form this is a simple statement of fact. When spoken out loud however, something happens - what should be a simple exercise is actually far from simple. Emotions are evoked, unexpected synapses are fired. I feel some awkwardness, an unease. Why should this be? I feel that the answer lies somewhere in the space between myself and others, in the mass of meanings I have introjected since first hearing this word. I am not stating a simple fact, I am claiming an identity – other people's words resonate: "man up", "be a man", "a man's man". This game can be played in other ways: "I am a Father" (yes, true, fairly positive feeling), "I am in my forties" (a bit cringy – midlife crisis anyone?), "I am a sexual being" (well, yes, true but feels so strange to say). The process of saying each statement ekes out little truths about myself, about language and about my relation to others. So there is the identity

of the football team and, boring down a little there is the identity of saying "I am a man". What is happening when we say these statements?

Somewhere insides us all, on some mysterious fabric of the soul, is an image of ourselves, built up through our lives. This is no ordinary image, it is multi-dimensional and deep. It contains those things that matter to us; our personalities, our strengths and weaknesses, our vices and virtues, our secrets and our sufferings and so on into parts of ourselves which lie beyond language. Come walk with me into this place, as into a cave whose walls are lined with these traits, these characteristics these qualities. Some glisten like jewels, some lurk like some subterranean slime. Many have names, meanings in language; 'goodness', 'father', 'Welshman' more or less understood but many do not, they are "/-\" and "\~/ " and "#_#". When I say "I am a man", my gaze is turned towards this image, and I hold a template from 'out there' and compare with this image within and feel how it fits.

How is this internal image crated? Do we pencil it in as we merrily skip through life? No…it is more the creation of a furnace, working in the space between ourselves and others, blasting us with meaning, whether we like it or not. The words and deeds of others take aim at us, it is an unavoidable process since we cannot create meaning in isolation from others. Our parents have the first hand in sketching out the image. With luck they are kind image-makers: "you are lovable", "you matter", "you are enough", though sadly they may not be: "you are bad", "you are nothing". These first elements of the image matter, they are deeply etched, they can last a life-time – for we carry this image everywhere, in our hearts and in our minds. We have only part ownership of this canvas – like some giant Etch a Sketch it can be doodled on by anyone – by their words and their deeds.

As my five year old self I had silvery blond hair and wore glasses - I stood out as being different. This was more or less tolerated in a small junior school but 'big school' was a more hostile environment and I had several years of name calling designed to hurt. This is identity used as a weapon and such is our connectedness that it is an easy thing to do – just look at the person and say a word, follow it up with some laughter to make sure the message hits home. After these experiences my reaction might have been to try desperately to fit in, but perhaps in defiance or perhaps because of some innate part of me, I shunned any sort of fitting in all the more as I reached the

last stages of school. In fact this independent mindedness became an identity itself. This had its advantages, it is good to think differently – it made me good at making people laugh and it made me good at problem-solving. I wonder now whether part of my drive to be original was to shake up that image-inside, to use the creative powers of thought to cover up some painful parts of the self. Whatever the mechanism it worked quite well – I have generally been content as an adult and have experienced joy. And this is how things continued until I became involved in the world of therapy and the messy business of looking inward.

Had I not taken this path I would not have dwelled on the pains of the past and how they might still be affecting me, in the here and now. One consequence of this inward gaze was to make me feel low, in a way I had not experienced before. I felt lost, empty and in some way unsure of who I was. What was I good for? I remember searching for things that I was ok at, for parts of self that seemed of worth. I remember thinking that I was someone who gives my children something valuable - the message that they are enough as they are and that they are loved. This sounded like a good thing to be doing, this allowed me to say to myself "I am a decent Father". I allowed myself some more thoughts of this kind..."I try to do good", "I am interested in the world" – short statements about myself which I felt to be true. This was identity used as a tonic. And here's the thing, these statements had an effect beyond their linguistic value. They created something which is not of language but which I *felt* - a new 'form' - a new part of me.

Going back to the cave, where the contours and forms of our inner selves dwell, there is a mysterious substance which I believe we understand but for which we have no words. It is the contours of the rock itself and it is these rather than words that we instinctively grasp when we encounter another person. After meeting them we might say "they were shy, they were arrogant, they were x, they were y" but these are just verbal manifestations of a felt form which is more quickly yet less consciously grasped. Somehow, from making these simple statements about myself I changed myself. I created something that wasn't there before. A new 'form' which is not of language but which affects many things which do have a place in language – self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-worth, communication, anxiety to name but a few. This inner-image then, this *self-identity in its fullest form* is affected by others for sure, but given the

opportunity, we are able to change it for ourselves, for it is part of ourselves and this process can start by saying something good about ourselves.

Discussion

The footballing example which began the synthesis feels close to Stryker and Burke's (2000) definition of 'identity' given above. My exploration of self-identity in the remainder of the synthesis seems in one sense 'broader' and in one sense 'deeper'. If I say "I am a footballer", we are firmly in the territory of identity in the sense of societal roles. If we say "I am a man", we are still in the realm of *roles* but the complex meaning of 'man' (biological, social, gendered, sexual) makes this a more nuanced statement, expanding the meaning of identity and therefore self-identity a little. If instead we say "I am good", this change to an abstractly defined concept, yet one which has great meaning, seems to expand the identification beyond what is normally termed a 'role'. As a consequence, the meaning of self-identity seems correspondingly 'broader'. My finding from research was that identification with such positive meanings can change a part of the self in a way that seems to go beyond the linguistic elements identified with and to bring about a felt change which I called non-verbal self-identity. This is the sense in which I claim a 'deepening' of the phenomenon defined here as compared to Stryker and Burke (2000).

Could it be that this 'expanded' self-identity is actually close to Roger's (1959) 'self-concept' given above? I feel it differs in the following three ways. Firstly, Roger's definition seems more general, in including all perceptions about 'I', whether emotionally significant or not. In my exploration of 'self-identity', the things identified with all *mattered* in some way, that was why they were taken as part of the self. Secondly, Roger's gestalt is described as 'fluid' and a 'process'. While my 'self-identity' is malleable, it is made of the stuff that is *sticky*, that doesn't change so readily. Amongst this semi-permanent gestalt is the 'non-verbal' element described above; the identification of this is a third difference compared to Rogers' concept of self.

This non-verbal self-identity which can be felt within brings to mind Gendlin's 'felt-sense' (Gendlin, 2012). Where it seems different to Gendlin's concept has to do with permanency. Gendlin's felt-sense is something which is felt with regard to a particular person or situation but which is hard to put into words. On following Gendlin's 'focusing'

method, this felt-sense may change, indeed this is the basis of Gendlin's therapeutic method (Gendlin 2012). In other words, the felt-sense is non-permanent and is subject to change. My 'form' described here is a more permanent part of self. Instead of being part of the flow of the stream, it is part of the contour of the river-bed.

The multicultural-counselling movement's critique of identity highlights the fact that identity is not necessarily chosen but instead can be imposed on a person. My exploration of self-identity included this phenomenon on the micro scale of name-calling on the school playground – identity used as a 'weapon'. For me, the ideas of this movement have been very influential, both in a general sense and in relation to counselling. In particular, the idea that differences in identity foreshadow any meeting between counsellor and client and should be taken into account. My new understanding of self-identity adds to this awareness by providing some clues about how identity can be not just noticed, but used as a positive therapeutic tool.

By undertaking this study I have found that the phenomenon of self-identity is a new and useful way of making sense of myself which may be useful to others. I have described this phenomenon as a part of the self which holds the stuff that matters, our meanings. This can be subject to others' ideas about our identities including, significantly our early care-givers. This part of self is 'sticky', it is able to change but does not do so rapidly or easily. I experienced a process which seemed to change this part of self. This process was begun by identifying with some possible things which I felt were true about myself. The end product of the process was the creation of a gestalt which I have called here 'non-verbal self-identity' and which I experience as a 'form'. This I conceptualised as the 'fabric' of the self-identity described.

Conclusions

All research leads to further questions and I would like to set out the main questions I have about these findings. It is an assumption of the method that individual truths discovered heuristically will have some truth universally – that n=1 can be sufficient to discover new knowledge. I feel a curiosity to know whether other people would feel similarly about the significance of self-identity as presented here. Would others find simple statements of identification informative or interesting? Would others find the 'broadening' and 'deepening' of the term 'self-identity' described above useful or

interesting? I am particularly curious to know what others might make of the 'non-verbal self-identity' described – this 'form' which can be felt and which can give rise to more easily defined phenomena such as self-confidence. I am able to describe the process by which it is formed though I do not claim to understand this process. I can describe how it feels inside but I do not know whether there is one unique form or many forms which can be found.

My original question, "What does self-identity have to do with my development as a counsellor?" can now be answered. The change in myself brought about by engaging with the phenomenon of self-identity has allowed me to encounter others in a more confident way. As a counsellor I am better able to offer a holding presence. The change in my understanding of self-identity has made me aware of the power of simple statements; "I am good", "I am a caring person". I am also more alert to the negative effects of identification. These can result from others' words and deeds, be they early care-givers, partners or society in general. Sometimes a person's self-identity can be fragile: a person can feel bereft when a role that has defined them for many years is lost. Equally, a person's self-identity may seem not exist at all and filling this vacuum may be transformative. I feel these ideas echo many in the humanistic approach to counselling in which I have trained - undertaking this study has allowed me to conceptualise these in a way of direct relevance to myself and to my own process of change.

References

BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) (2016) *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions.* . Lutterworth, UK: BACP. [Online]. Available at: https://www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/ethical-framework-for-the-counselling-professions/ (Accessed: 13 April 2018).

Edgar, A. and Sedgwick, P. (eds.) (2002) *Cultural theory: The key concepts*. London: Routledge.

Gendlin, E. T. (2012) *Focusing-oriented psychotherapy: A manual of the experiential method.* Kindle edition. New York: Guilford Publications.

Given, L. (ed.) (2008) *The Sage Encylodpedia of Qualitative Research Methods.* London: SAGE.

Gove, J. and Watt, S. (2004) 'Identity and Gender', in Woodward, K. (ed.) *Questioning Identity: gender, class, ethnicity.* London: Routledge.

Lago, C. (ed.) (2011) *The handbook of transcultural counselling and psychotherapy.* Kindle edition. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Moustakas, C. (1990) *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Application.* (Kindle edn.) London: SAGE.

Ponterotto, J., Casas, J., Suzuki, L. and Alexander, C. (eds.) (2001), *Handbook of Multicultural counseling - 2nd edition*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Proctor, G. (2011) 'Diversity: The depoliticization of inequalities', *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, 10 (4), pp. 231–234.

Rogers, C. (1959) 'A Theory of Therapy, Personality, and Interpersonal Relationships, as Developed in the Client-centered Framework', in Koch, S. (ed.) *Psychology: A Study of a Science, Study 1. Conceptual and Systematic, Volume 3. Formulations of the Person and the Social Context,* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Stryker, S. and Burke, P. (2000) 'The Past, Present and Future of an Identity Theory', *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63 (4), pp.284-297.