

# Relentless Accountabilities and Co-'authoring' our Professional Lives

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## Abstract

This article summarizes activities from a workshop on the career development of counsellors. The perspective taken is borrowed from narrative psychology and therapy, and the workshop's activities are seen as "re-authoring" opportunities. These opportunities arise from questions, answered in pairs, designed to promote reflection and decision-making on aspects of practice germane to experienced counsellors. Counselling is portrayed as a profession where we are expected to balance accountabilities, including those we have to ourselves, and our most important non-work relationships. Narrating the story of our professional life is therefore one in which our 'authorship' in all areas of accountability is required.

This article is targeted at veteran counsellors, though those new to the field might be interested by the issues and questions raised. The primary question I raise here is: What does it mean to practice accountably these days while remaining accountable to our personal, family and community lives? Counselling is a career one can easily get lost in because the demands are so great, and our energies so finite. So, in the article which follows I ask you to join me in exploring issues which are part of the great balancing act of meeting our work and professional obligations, staying motivated to that work, and seeing that our relationships (to ourselves and others who matter to us) remain healthy. I raise and invite your reflection on elements of this balancing act with the hope that you can constructively use such reflection to further guide you in your career and personal development as counsellors. The outcomes of this reflection could reaffirm your relationships to your present balancing act, or possibly nudge you to achieve a more personally satisfying

balance of the professional and personal in your life.

## Balancing accountabilities

Frontline practice in counselling has never carried a greater weight of accountability. A combination of developments has brought this on but practicing as a counsellor has come to mean doing more in less time, with greater scrutiny than formerly was the case (Johnson, 1995). Our professional bodies expect adherence to increasingly detailed codes of ethics and conduct, not the least of which is the trend toward stricter adherence to empirically validated treatments and diagnostic procedures. Laws and legal judgments affecting how we counsel convey a sense that we practice in a minefield where seemingly innocent missteps can easily result in grave professional consequences. Our clients are increasingly more consumer-savvy, bringing internet-researched understandings of their concerns and what to do about them while expecting collaboration in areas formerly considered by many as our prerogative. The service contexts where we practice feel the squeeze of greater accountability, too, passing on to us what clients, funders and other partners in delivering counselling services expect of them. New intervention methods and research findings proliferate making it impossible to comprehensively stay on top of all developments within our profession. And, this is all before we factor in the personal and relational dimensions of being a counsellor. Buffeted by these competing aspirations and expectations, defining oneself as a counsellor has never been more challenging. Already a high burn-out profession, we face what most workplace stress researchers know: there's a slippery slope between losing influence over the nature of our work, and burn-out (Grosch & Olsen, 1994).

Even the word *accountability* might leave some of you cringing as it carries with it connotations of yet more obligation and scrutiny. The purpose of this paper and its reported activities is to revisit what it means to define our roles in the face of all that pulls on us personally and professionally. Behind it is a rationale: we can become better authors of our own experience when we resist being 'authored' by our experiences.

## Method

This article is based on a workshop designed to help counselling professionals re-connect with their intentions, commitments, values, professional and personal relationships, and the *place* counselling occupies within their lifestyle. The guiding ideas behind the workshop are narrative and social constructionist, assuming that the meanings we live by are constructed primarily through social interaction (Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1999; McNamee & Gergen, 1999). Cumulatively, these interactions help us make sense of our experiences, usually in story form. But, we are not passive in our personal stories; we author and narrate them in relating to our social experiences, making use of the plausible understandings available to us. From this perspective, the workshop, like similar others (e.g., Strong, 1997), aims to engage participants in speaking in novel ways about their experience, inviting them to relate to (and possibly alter) their personal narratives of experience in new and preferred ways. It is because our stories gain their significance in the sharing (Newman & Holzman, 1999) that I facilitate workshop experiences that are primarily interactive, using questions to promote unfamiliar perspectives and discussions. While on one hand I believe that a coherent personal story of experience can be a valuable, touchstone resource, I am also wary of the

potential of some stories to cohere and conserve problematic understandings (Newman, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). For example, a counsellor may feel stuck in a constricted or 'stale-dated' story of their career; or, conversely, they may find their counselling story one which promotes creativity and resilience in meeting relentless professional challenges. So, the activities of this workshop offer participants opportunities to bring greater clarity and coherence to their personal stories of being counsellors, while affording possibilities to revise those stories as the questions invite them to speak from new perspectives.

If we want to consider our careers stories we live (Cochran & Savickas, 1997), it helps to be living them according to preferred plotlines (Eron & Lund, 1996). Of course, these stories are not solely our creation; they have many co-authors, so to speak. Our career stories are, in effect, as much negotiated as co-authored, because to live them means to see how they fare as we take them into our counselling and other life experiences and relationships. Most experienced counsellors can point to developments where relationships and particular experiences became wanted or unwanted *co-authors*. Counselling is a profession where sometimes our cumulative professional experience can develop into a story Ram Dass (Dass & Gorman, 1985) once referred to as "the helper's prison". Regardless, the workshop invites participants to reflect on, and share different perspectives, to further the possibilities that we live preferred career stories. To gain, optimally, from the exercises/questions that follow (you will also see them as appendices at the end of the article), find two conversational partners with whom you can discuss your answers: a fellow counsellor, and a trusted non-counsellor friend or family member. Simply reading, and reflecting on the answers will not have the same effect.

### Our relationship with our intentions

The story behind how we chose to be counsellors can feel like a faint recollection, as we become veterans in our field. But, behind any commitment to

something as demanding as a career are our intentions. Lose sight of them, and we can feel we're living, to paraphrase Peter Hansen (1985), other peoples' stories for our lives. As with any long-term endeavour (e.g., a marriage, having children), however, our intentions change over time. As our motivations in becoming counsellors meet the demands of front-line practice, new motivations emerge while others recede in terms of personal significance. Many of us entered counselling with a starry-eyed-change-the-world enthusiasm and if our subsequent experiences didn't make us cynics, we learned to scale back our hopes and expectations. We may have had career-changing experiences in the course of our practice, as we worked with new populations, found new approaches to practice, or took on roles beyond the consulting room. As our personal lives changed; so possibly changed the centrality of career to our personal identity, and the importance we placed on family and community. Some of us will have been counselling clients ourselves, prompting previously unthought of questions regarding what we do. Worse, as narrative therapist Michael White (1997) highlighted, our intentions in being counsellors are often pathologized by media characterizations of our professional personalities (see "What about Bob" or "The Prince of Tides"), implying that we use our work to address our personal shortcomings.

Like ships blown off course it is possible that we no longer feel guided by our intentional compass as our career pulls us forward with its many demands. In this initial part of the workshop participants are asked to revisit their *relationship* with their intentions. This wording might seem unusual: do we have intentions or do we relate to them? My answer is that both apply. While we may claim something as an intention, what we do with it later – our relationship to it in guiding our actions – can be an entirely different matter. Our intentions are our personal constructions of what matters to us; how we relate to them as potential resources in going forward is the concern here. In solution-focused therapy talk, living by our intentions is living "on track" (Walter & Peller, 1992).

So, early in the workshop attention is given to articulating intentions and exploring the relationships participants have with them as resources in leading a preferred life.

### Questions

The questions that follow are intended for counsellors to use in dyads at the workshop. In one sense, the pre-suppositions of these questions *invite* counsellors to articulate and clarify their seldom-considered professional intentions. In another way, sharing their answers to such questions with others, for some narrative theorists (e.g., Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), can help people affirm and commit to what they "talk into being". So, these questions are meant to engage counsellor participants in the workshop in reflective processes they make public to at least one professional colleague. Inviting people into such a metacognitive stance (e.g., Flavell, 1977) on their practice of counselling, and their motivations for it, via such discussions, can itself be an empowering experience. The discussions also hold the potential to articulate change-promoting beliefs, a key feature in Prochaska, DiClemente and Norcross' (1992) stages of change model. Since the counsellor participants' audience is another counsellor skilled in helping people articulate often-difficult ideas and feelings, listening is usually anything but passive. Roles are exchanged with each party taking up being a listener and speaker, taking turns interviewing or being interviewed from questions like those that follow:

- 1) What initially motivated you to become a counsellor?
- 2) What are the primary intentions you bring to counselling now?
- 3) If these changed between starting as a counsellor and now, what prompted the change?
- 4) In reflecting on your interactions with clients and peers, where do you feel your intentions best show through in those interactions? Illustrate with examples.
- 5) What challenges do you face in keeping "on track" with your intentions? How can you rise to those challenges and still feel "on track"?

6) What has your relationship with your career intentions been like as you've faced the different challenges in being a counsellor? In other words, have your intentions been as much of a source of guidance and inspiration in your work as you would like? Explain.

7) In the long-run, what will tell you that you have practiced and lived in ways that have you feeling you've kept 'in sync' with your intentions?

As mentioned earlier, social constructionists see meanings gaining their significance in relationships through "objectivizing" what is discussed, crystallizing ideas into meaningful words that can be revisited in future thinking or conversations (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). Narrative therapists, in particular (e.g., Epston, 1994; Strong & Flynn, 2000), consider documentation as a resource capable of furthering preferred stories, so the "interviewers" are also asked to be "documenters" of responses that their interviewees consider noteworthy. In this way, each respondent may complete the workshop with notes useful for further reflection.

### Our relationship with counselling

Michael Sussman (1995) called ours "a perilous calling". Whether we consider the contexts in which we practice, the nature of our clients and their presenting concerns, the increasingly prescriptive and litigation-fraught professionalism to which we are bound, or the administrative and collegial aspects of our work, we serve many 'masters' where the stakes are often high. Family therapist, Jay Haley (1987), considered relationships potentially 'crazy-making' (double binds) if we can't influence them where this matters to us. Yet, the average counsellor practices in hierarchical circumstances where they have little influence over how they practice. In an era where healthcare services are increasingly rationed, when the pressures on us to produce outcomes are reinforced with micro-managerial strategies that one writer likened to having "big brother in the consulting room" (Wylie, 1994), the push for accountability in our work has never been greater (Johnson, 1995). And, this is before we factor in the intense feelings we work with that some researcher-clinicians feel contribute to

"compassion fatigue" or burnout, two potential occupational hazards of counselling (e.g., Figley, 1995; Grosch & Olsen, 1994).

While there are day in day out vagaries in our work, when we generalize our counselling experience it can be understood as a story with a seeming trajectory. This story connotes a relationship we have with our work and professional identity. But it has many co-authors, and to the extent possible the workshop aims to engage participants as authors/editors-in-chief of their professional stories. We can become alienated from our own experience when this capacity and influence diminishes for us (Newman & Holzman, 1997) so the workshop aims to reconnect participants with novel ways of construing, and acting within, their roles and circumstances. Characterizing counselling as something we have a relationship to, can feel initially awkward for participants. Consistent with a narrative therapy approach, the view shared here is that we can *externalize* aspects of our experience we consider intrinsic to who we are such as our professional identity. One imaginative twist on this concept involves interviewing one person in a relationship, requesting them to speak *as if* they could accurately and faithfully represent how their partner would want to be heard (Epston, 1993, Snyder, 1995). In this workshop, however, participants are asked to go one step further: the counsellor's professional identity itself is interviewed, as if it could give feedback on the relationship the counsellor has with 'it'. In this sense, the interviewer asks the interviewee to speak as if s/he was her/his professional identity with 'its' own voice. A related example, from the externalizing practices of narrative therapy, is to request to speak to a client's temper, as if that temper had its own personality (see Epston, 1992). The conceptual separation of the person from an influential aspect of her/him permits novel forms of reflection. Such exercises are also commonplace for those familiar with psychodrama (e.g., Blatner & Blatner, 1997), and in my experience most participants easily orient to them after some initial clarification of instructions. These kinds of questions come up late in the next

series of questions. Again, in pairs, participants are asked to take turns as interviewers/documenters and interviewees.

### Questions

1) What are key factors, other than those you (as your professional identity) bring to counselling, that influence how you practice? To what extent have these come to define your practice? Explain.

2) Share your views on what it means to practice accountably. Be sure to include personal views as well as those from your employer, clients and professional organizations. Describe your experience in trying to reconcile these views.

3) Identify those factors that most support AND most erode the quality of your relationship with counselling.

4) When do you feel your relationship with counselling is at its best? What specifically occurs then that makes your relationship with counselling feel at its best?

5) Here you are asked to imaginatively separate *you* the person from *you* the counsellor. Then, please give feedback to you the person in answering the following: a) what are the most important qualities that *s/he* (i.e., you the person) brings to counselling? b) how would you characterize the present relationship *you* the counsellor have with *you* the person? c) what does the counsellor in you need most from *him/her*?

6) Continuing on in this manner, but reversing roles so that *you* the person are in the 'hot seat': a) what experiences does *s/he* (the counsellor) bring to your life that you most/least appreciate? b) how would you characterize the present relationship you have with *him/her*? c) what do you most need from *him/her* to live a preferred life?

Clearly, these are unusual questions, but when effective, they draw participants into examining new perspectives on their professional and personal lives. Characterizing ourselves as having a relationship to our practice can help us stand back from it and assess how it is, and how we would like it to be. In the case of looking at a marriage or a friendship, we might think to ourselves: if only the other person could be a better person than I'd have a better relationship with him/her. However, it

is harder to make such an argument about how we invest ourselves professionally. Examining that investment, and considering how we could optimally influence it, is the intent of these questions.

### Relating to our professional relationships

We're in a relationship profession. Whether we consider our relationships to clients, employers, our professional organizations or our colleagues, the heart of our work takes place in relationships our skills help us create and co-manage. Of course, we're not channeling the spirit of Carl Rogers (1961) into every one of these relationships. Professionally, we juggle our multiple roles to be warm and empathic, productive and conscientious, ethical and competent, and supportive and resourceful. An insidious thing can happen to people (like us) who make themselves so constantly available to others: they can lose their ability to recognize and assert their needs. Here is where a virtue of selflessness can cross the line and become a vice. Healthy veterans in the helping professions often come to this realization, finding means to address it, while balancing their commitment to clients; others can hit a personal and professional wall with this challenge (Berger, 1995). Left unattended, such issues can nudge counsellors precipitously toward a slippery slope from which professional boundary violations are more likely to occur (Peterson, 1992). Conversely, sometimes the relentless relational demands on us spill over into our personal lives; prompting a retreat into isolation, even in our closest relationships where sharing the seemingly mundane aspects of daily life pales in contrast to the dramas of participating in clients' lives (Deutsch, 1985). Alongside those dramas can be complicated professional relationships that require deft skill in upholding. There are bosses to please, other human service professionals to partner with or lobby as we help clients, and the normal stuff of 'workplace politics'. Not surprisingly, many counsellors feel "peopled out" at the end of their workday. As the wife of a physician once told me, "he gave at the office". In short, there are relational tugs on our

professionalism and civility constantly and these can stretch our sense of sociality, at the same time as we have social needs personally.

This part of the workshop asks participants to look at their relationships, cognizant that they are discussing them in relationships. Somehow sharing our experiences and preferences with another ups our investment in acting on what we share. This is what feminist and narrative therapists refer to as *witnessing* (Weingarten, 2000) or *audiencing* (Adams-Westcott & Isenbart, 1995) where our internal dialogue can be externalized, and take on a shared and often greater significance.

### Questions

- 1) Where are your work relationships most/least satisfying to you? Explain.
- 2) Are there any differences in you personally, or socially, from the time you entered counselling until the present? To what do you attribute this sameness or difference? How would long term friends or family members answer this question as it pertains to you?
- 3) In what ways have your professional relationships enriched/eroded your most important relationships? Explain.
- 4) Being experienced as a counsellor, what advice would you give to someone entering the profession when it comes to balancing the relationship demands of this work? How did you come to have this opinion?
- 5) What more can you do to optimize the relationship balancing act so that you are doing more than just ensuring everyone else's needs are met, while yours go unattended? Describe, if you can, what that optimal balance might look like.

These questions can sometimes provoke painful recognitions, asking us to speak from aspects of our experience we can comfortably hear from our clients, but perhaps not from ourselves. Sharing such recognitions can promote a shared empathy and appreciation for the hard work counsellors do. One of the greatest burnout factors in our profession is the isolation that comes with not managing this relationship, in ways that covers everyone's needs, excluding our own. These discussions have the potential of opening counsellors to other similar conversations thereafter.

### Our relationship with practice

Practicing as a counsellor involves ceaseless assessments, decisions and interventions – all of which can bring changes to the lives of our clients. Sometimes the expectation can feel like we are supposed to be batting 1000 when practically our shared triumphs with clients don't come close to that. We are paid to make a difference, and rising to the challenge means pitting our competence against problems that won't easily resolve. Our clients, and sometimes our employers, can equate what we do with medical intervention, expecting quick improvements as we *administer treatment* to clients, as if our interventions were akin to medications (Stiles & Shapiro, 1989). Staying on top of the ceaseless innovations in counselling can be quite daunting; staying inspired by our ideas and interventions presents another challenge. Most master practitioners undertake shifts in the ideas and interventions they bring to counselling through the course of their career (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999). Bandwagon approaches come and go, research highlights new things to focus our clinical attention on, and we can lose faith in approaches that come to feel stale for us. At the same time, assessment and intervention seemingly require greater exactitude, as emphases on correct DSM-IV diagnoses and empirically validated treatments become increasing administrative expectations for how we practice.

Defining competent practice is not a precise science and has been the focus of many debates (e.g., Beutler, 2000). Despite such ambiguities about "good practice", it is more likely that we will hear about "screwing up" in our work than about our shared successes with clients. Regardless, we have ourselves to satisfy and one measure of our success is that we become obsolete professionally to our clients. The modal number of sessions clients will see us for is one (that's for 40% of what we do) and what apparently is considered helpful usually has little to do with the methods we use or our crafty interventions (Duncan & Miller, 2000; Talmon, 1990). Still, we have an understandable desire to practice competently, and succeed in navigating the complex expect-

tations our clients and employers have of us.

Turning to our work and feeling good about it clearly involves several factors. We want to be inspired, feel competent, know we're making a difference, and feel at home in what we do. This next set of questions is designed to tap into these factors, promoting consideration of our current competence while extending our sense of where we can continue to build on it.

### Questions

- 1) What does it mean for you to practice competently? Where do you recognize your competence most as you counsel?
- 2) What ideas and innovations in your practice most inspire you? Explain.
- 3) If I interviewed some of your clients who felt most helped by you what would they tell me about your work with them that they most appreciated?
- 4) When do you feel most/least alive in your work as a counsellor? Please elaborate.
- 5) Looking ahead to when you move on from counselling, what are some of the key things you would like to point to you as the accomplishments and qualities you brought to your work? Are there things you need to yet do to see these qualities and accomplishments realized?

These questions conclude the workshop and serve as a good springboard to bring closure to the workshop.

### Conclusion

It was Socrates who once said, "the unexamined life is not worth living" (cited in Helm, 1997, 38a). This workshop is presented as an opportunity to "take one's professional bearings". The motivation is to help counsellors reflect on and clarify where they stand, and what they want to do about some central issues related to long term, professionally and personally accountable (it is unusual to see these words paired up with notions of accountability) practice. Many workshops addressing such a topic are psychoeducational and usually focus on relevant information. This workshop is intentionally participatory, with the hope that engaging people in speaking to their experiences will make

further discussion and action based on the workshop discussions easier.

In debriefing the exercises, the participants are asked to consider how they will make use of the documentation put together for them by their interviewers. They are also asked what they would like to do to continue the conversations begun on these issues beyond the workshop. There are no expected outcomes in terms of where the workshop might take participants, but it is hoped that the exercises will engage them in becoming more active authors of their professional lives.

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### Appendix A – Relating to our Intentions Questions

(to be answered in role-changing pairs – use the back of the page if required)

- 1) What initially motivated you to become a counsellor?
- 2) What are the primary intentions you bring to counselling now?
- 3) If these changed between starting as a counsellor and now, what prompted the change?
- 4) In reflecting on your interactions with clients and peers, where do you feel your intentions best show through in those interactions? Illustrate with examples.
- 5) What challenges do you face in keeping "on track" with your intentions? How can you rise to those challenges and still feel "on track"?
- 6) What has your relationship with your career intentions been like as you've faced the different challenges in being a counsellor? In other words, have your intentions been as much of a source of guidance and inspiration in your work as you would like? Explain.
- 7) In the long-run, what will tell you that you have practiced and lived in ways that have you feeling you've kept 'in sync' with your intentions?

### Appendix B – Relating to Counselling Questions

(to be answered in role-changing pairs – use the back of the page if required)

- 1) What are the key factors, other than those you bring to counselling, that influence how you practice? To what extent have these come to define your practice? Explain.
- 2) Share your views on what it means to practice accountably. Be sure to include personal views as well as those from your employer, clients and professional organizations. Describe your experience in trying to reconcile these views.
- 3) Identify those factors that most support AND most erode the quality of your relationship with counselling.
- 4) When do you feel your relationship with counselling is at its best? What specifically occurs then that makes your relationship with counselling feel at its best?
- 5) Here you are asked to imaginatively separate *you* the person from *you* the counsellor. Then, please give feedback to you the person in answering the following: a) what are the most important qualities that *s/he* (i.e., you the person) brings to counselling? b) how would you characterize the present relationship *you* the counsellor have with *you* the person? c) what does the counsellor in you need most from *him/her*?
- 6) Continuing on in this manner, but reversing roles so that *you* the person are in the 'hot seat': a) what experiences does *s/he* (the counsellor) bring to your life that you most/least appreciate? b) how would you characterize the present relationship you have with *him/her*? c) what do you most need from *him/her* to live a preferred life?

**Appendix C – Relating to  
Counselling’s Relationships  
Questions**

(to be answered in role-changing pairs  
– use the back of the page if required)

- 1) Where are your work relationships most/least satisfying to you? Explain.
- 2) Are there any differences in you personally, or socially, from the time you entered counselling until the present? To what do you attribute this sameness or difference? How would long term friends or family members answer this question as it pertains to you?
- 3) In what ways have your professional relationships enriched/eroded your most important relationships? Explain.
- 4) Being experienced as a counsellor, what advice would you give to someone entering the profession when it comes to balancing the relationship demands of this work? How did you come to have this opinion?
- 5) What more can you do to optimize the relationship balancing act so that you are doing more than just ensuring everyone else’s needs are met, while yours go unattended? Describe, if you can, what that optimal balance might look like.

**Appendix D Relating to our  
Practice Questions**

(to be answered in role-changing pairs  
– use the back of the page if required)

- 1) What does it mean for you to practice competently? Where do you recognize your competence most as you counsel?
- 2) What ideas and innovations in your practice most inspire you? Explain.
- 3) If I interviewed some of your clients who felt most helped by you what would they tell me about your work with them that they most appreciated?
- 4) When do you feel most/least alive in your work as a counsellor? Please elaborate.

- 5) Looking ahead to when you move on from counselling, what are some of the key things you would like to point to you as the accomplishments and qualities you brought to your work? Are there things you need to yet do to see these qualities and accomplishments realized?