Reconstructing "Otherness" — Counselling that Cultivates Belonging

by

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Abstract

This capstone project explores how counsellors can support individuals who feel a lack of belonging in their lives based on parts of their identity that are less obvious or perceptible. The research question investigated was: how can the frameworks of social constructionism and queer theory help counsellors nurture feelings of belonging and affirmation in clients who feel they experience ‘otherness’? The methodological framework used to guide the literature review was an integrative review. Findings from this research include ways that narrative therapy can be used and improved to uplift clients. Recommendations in a counselling session include: directly initiating conversations about a client’s experience of otherness, ongoing counsellor humility and self-reflection, and present moment awareness of relational dynamics. Reviewing this project can provide a new lens to improve counsellor awareness for supporting individuals who experience otherness. This understanding can provide recommendations to foster belonging in those who have historically felt out of place.

Keywords: belonging, otherness, social constructionism, queer theory, narrative therapy

"I am like a drop of water in the ocean.

How can you define where I begin and end?"

Leah Brew (Monk et al., 2019, p. 238)

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Reconstructing "Otherness" — Counselling that Cultivates Belonging

Chapter One: Introduction

Overview of the Topic

What does it feel like to be a lone wanderer in the vast plains of identity, seemingly lost and without community, outside the margins of 'normal'? A lack of belonging seems bound to cause anguish, particularly around a complex topic like identity. In a world of increasing labels and identification systems, there is a rapid emergence of new language to convey identity markers. While some may find solace in their identities, others may continue experiencing feelings of estrangement—and the pain that accompanies it. Maddux and Winstead (2020) explained, "Norms for socially normal or acceptable behaviour are not derived scientifically but instead are based on the values, beliefs, and historical practices of the culture, which determine who is accepted or rejected by a society or culture" (p. 7). My aim for this project is to explore how counsellors can impact the feelings of rejection or estrangement that certain people with multifaceted identities have, especially when they feel they exist on the periphery of 'normal'. This capstone will explore how counsellors can help evoke the potential richness hidden in the fog of identity by tapping into different ways of thinking—ways that embrace fluidity, changes in perception, and empowerment through shifting language.

'Otherness' and Other Key Terms

In this project, I will refer to a definition of belonging linked with how "people define themselves and their sense of social place in the context of living with diversity" (Moran, 2019, p. 5). Moran (2019) described how belonging, a sense of fitting in, can be cultivated when people clarify and understand the ways that they support their lives, portray themselves, or conceive of their identity.

On the other hand, a feeling of ‘otherness’ was described by Muse et al. (2021) as feeling different, alienated, and excluded from an individual’s life and those surrounding them. Orsini (2021) explained it as when one or more groups of people delineate differences and create ideas of acceptability and unacceptability. Major and O’Brien (2005) similarly described the notion of stigmatization as when people have, or believe they have, some qualities that label them as being different or of lesser value when compared to others. Bezreh et al. (2012) highlighted that stigma intensifies when the marker is seen as voluntary or a choice.

While being ‘othered’ often has a negative connotation, the capitalized term ‘Other’, referring to the experience of Otherness, will be used throughout this paper as a playful, nourishing surrogate term for the vast range of hard-to-convey identity expressions that differ from the perceived norm. This emerges in the writing that follows through concepts that will explore the fluidity of identity, celebrating the unknown, and positions existing in-between more prevalent societal labels such as binary terms of straight/gay or male/female.

Before addressing feelings of existing on the outside of normality, it is crucial to briefly explore the concept of culture itself. Arthur (2018) explained that broadly speaking, it includes customs, values, and traditions that people form based on the context of the environments they inhabit. Nemoianu (2010) claims that culture encompasses aspects of society that include political, historical, and geographical practices, social customs, and habits. There appears to be a link between belonging and seeing oneself reflected in such an array of values and customs. According to Orsini (2021), a sense of belonging seems to be linked with feelings of inclusion, exclusion, and tenets of power. Arthur (2018) validates this link by explaining that culture is akin to the glue that binds people together—embedded in the notion of culture is that it expands beyond the individual, and as such, implies that belonging is key.

In a world rich with diverse cultures of varying characteristics such as ethnicity, sexuality, race, class, and gender, we can infer that cultures are made up of norms, and therefore outliers must also exist. Dividing practices (Foucault, 1965), a term expressed by French philosopher Michel Foucault, expose people through objectification based on their social differences, followed by physical and spatial separation because of their difference (Madigan, 1992). Those seemingly illegitimate, inauthentic outliers of the social realm are the ones who experience otherness in this paper. In conversation with these individuals, they would be the ones who both claim to feel like outsiders of something and feel painful feelings due to that status. Further, the combinations of cultures are countless, and it would be impossible to cover all examples of culture, so this paper will weave in varied examples of experiencing Otherness.

Exploring Lenses and Defining Terms

Curiosity about identity appears highly applicable in the counselling world where individuals seek a stronger understanding of themselves, followed by questioning how they should be (Thomas, 2002). For the duration of this capstone paper, identity will be studied through both a Queer Theory lens (Barker & Scheele, 2016; Tilsen, 2021) and a social constructionist lens (Gergen, 1985; Monk et al., 2019; Neimeyer, 1998; Rudes & Guterman, 2007). I will define and rationalize my use of these frameworks later in this chapter, but first, it is worth examining what some terms mean that inform the frameworks.

Normativity and Queerness

Queer has had many definitions throughout history, is often disputed, and seems to shift in its use depending on the context (Barker & Scheele, 2016). However, this paper will refer to a definition that matches Hammack et al. (2019): “notions that challenge or deviate enough from the normative to historically warrant social or legal condemnation and/or political opposition” (p.

557). While the term used to have a negative connotation, today, many have reclaimed it and use it to examine the current way things are while scrutinizing ideas of 'normal', especially regarding sexuality and gender (Hammack et al., 2019). Barker and Scheele (2016) go a step further in celebrating multiple meanings of the term queer, noting how it is critical to try to hold multiple truths over a supposed type of normal.

'Normal' will frequently be referred to as normativity in this paper, which refers to notions considered ideal and typical across a population (Hammack et al. 2019), which in this paper will primarily refer to Canada, given that I live in this region of the world. Maddux and Winstead (2020) noted the inverse, abnormal, referring to anything that is away from the norm or typical average. While this paper aims to explore another version of people who exist apart from the realm of ‘normal’, it would be impossible to speak to so much variation. Rather, this paper will capture a small subsection of identity experiences, particularly in the areas of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and disability.

Intangible, but Substantial - Introducing Liminality and Borderlands

The term liminality or liminal identities emerged in my research of otherness. Liminality has been defined in various ways. Beech (2011) stated that liminality referred to a “reconstruction of identity (in which the sense of self is significantly disrupted) in such a way that the new identity is meaningful for the individual and their community." (p. 287). Turner (1967, as cited in Beech, 2011) described the existence of an individual in between gathering and separation as representing a state of liminality, noting that they are typically invisible on a social level and find themselves ambiguously living outside the markers of existing socially constructed identities. Turner (1974, as cited in Robertson, 2018) used the term liminal phase in a different way when he examined the Ndembu tribe in Africa, observing how a unique, distinguished

period occurred as a rite of passage between two other identities of youth and adult. This study of what was in-between provides the language for liminality that exists today.

Languages were often constructed involving binaries of difference and comparison, such as weak versus strong or good versus bad (Robertson, 2018). Languages commonly refer to notions through expressions of similarities or differences to concepts that are already understood. Robertson (2018) remarked that as a result of this, an opposition of either/or emerges in the social realm, and this new polarized way of thinking becomes more solidified, along with the border that exists between it. Liminality, on the other hand, challenges polarization. Robertson (2018) explained that liminality, existing beyond commonly shared ideas, presents an opportunity to dismantle societal notions of stability.

Another contrast to this either/or way of thinking is found in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) who defined a borderland as "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary." (p. 25). In their non-physical form, borderlands appear to represent an area hard to see or understand—hypothetically acting as a placeholder word for those who struggle or do not feel it necessary to label themselves, a place where people can freely question power (Robertson, 2018). These two concepts provide new ways of looking at identity and culture. In this paper, liminality and borderlands will be used to refer to those who exist in areas that are not always as immediately clear and visible. These concepts will later be used to demonstrate the experiences of certain individuals who have not always been recognizable, or validated, at first glance.

A Few Words on Intersectionality

Earlier work done by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1991) first used the language of intersectionality to show ways that certain individuals were left out of consideration. She

explained that the experiences of Black men or White women did not parallel experiences of race or gender among Black women (Dhawan et al., 2018). Dhawan et al. (2018) explained a key feminist principle has always been to meticulously investigate various facets of discrimination. Dhawan et al. (2018) further mentioned how intersectionality was about exploring overlaps of categories such as race, class, sexuality, and gender and how these unique positions were not often taken into account, particularly in white feminist scholarly work and advocacy missions.

Intersectionality, spanning back to the late 1980s, is much broader and more expansive today than many people consider (Collins, 2019). Collins (2019) made an argument that intersectionality is heading towards operating as a critical social theory—one that fuses social action with critical analysis. Collins (2019) explained, “Some social theories have the power to oppress, and do so quite effectively, without most people realizing the power of theory in maintaining an unjust social order.” (p. 4) She then made a case for adding in the critical analysis since this creates opportunities for real life change to occur.

Intersectionality is a work-in-progress, no application of it can reach the extent of societal problems, and it needs to continuously endeavour to move towards unexplored places (Carbado et al, 2013). This explanation links well with the concepts of liminality and borderlands presented in this paper. Intersectionality certainly informs many of the emergent ideas in this paper, mainly since there is a strong overlap in discussions of equity and social justice, especially around LGBTQ+ topics (Collins, 2015). I am mindful of how I represent intersectionality in this project, given the rapid, far-reaching spread of the concept (Collins, 2015). Knapp (2005) made a clear point that theories, which are often complex, end up more diluted after gaining mass acceptance, often ending up misrepresented from original claims. For that reason, the focus and

discussion will instead look toward queer theory and social construction, as discussed in the theory section below.

Historical Practices of Estranging Others

This paper will not explore the far-reaching history of LGBTQ, Indigenous, or Black suffering, but is briefly hinted at here to indicate how individuals today are likely contending with complex histories that trickle down to their lived experiences. We can look to three different forms of mass-estrangement that have shown up in the past that limit the experiences of individuals today.

Warner (1991, as cited in Nylund & Tilsen, 2010) explained heteronormativity as the institutionalization of heterosexuality. This encompasses and centres sexual relationships between men and women and encompasses the practices that represent them. Homonormativity is an offshoot of this, with gay-identified people embracing similar practices of heterosexuals (Nylund & Tilsen, 2010). These forms of normativity can be seen as a remnant of old dominant systems that seek to secure a sense of 'correct' and 'normal' that spill into life today.

Hammack et al. (2019) commented on the late 19th century in North America and Europe as a time when science began to study sexuality, and the notion of an ideal arrangement was established along with the inverse and perverse 'species of the homosexual.' With the creation of a 'correct' way of normativity, psychology contributes to upholding ways of privileging areas like heterosexual relationships while pathologizing other ways (Mohr, 2009). Further, Hammack et al. (2019) noted that in the 21st century, progress had been made to include some of those other invisible relational forms, such as kink dynamics, polyamory, or relationships involving transgender individuals. At the same time, they observed that progress was still mapped in a universalistic way that compared them to normativity.

North American history over the past few centuries can also be seen as predominantly White, Eurocentric, and primarily responsible for creating a negative sense of 'otherness' in people, especially among Black and Indigenous individuals (Smith, 2021). This treatment history was primarily one of dominance and of portraying them as less than human (Mogul et al., 2011, as cited in Gutzwa, 2022). This degrading treatment, from slavery to so-called residential schools, also involved policies that controlled how gender and sexuality were expressed (Smith, 2015, as cited in Gutzwa, 2022).

With no shortage of history to show the harm perpetrated against those of non-dominant sexualities, genders, ethnicities, or abilities, we can also see how history informs future generations. Intergenerational trauma is an outcome of settler colonialism that profoundly forms the worldview, identities, and experiences of marginalized individuals (Anzaldúa, 1999). Looking at this definition of intergenerational trauma, feelings of estrangement seem to be appropriate for the lives of specific individuals who arrive in the counselling room. These brief historical examples show how oppression can impact individuals at a mass level. As such, it is worth examining the impact and perceptions of power since it largely informs the theoretical models highlighted in this paper.

Power Shaping People

Power may have a strong influence on the acceptability of identity labels and the ways that people perceive themselves in the world. Monk et al. (2019) explained how liberal humanism, a profoundly entrenched understanding of power in North American culture, reinforces the idea that working hard can allow us to generate more power—an individualist view of power. Thomas (2002) explained how structuralism, another theoretical framework that analyzes power, hinted that there was a way of studying people objectively, removing bias and

that, as a result, there were 'discoveries' and professions that emerged and gained majority prevalence in much of the world. The implications of an authentic self, deep within a person, led to responses from the world of psychology that praised good qualities while noting a deficiency in so-called bad qualities. This developing evaluation of good and bad is possibly a reason for inner tensions experienced by counselling clients who do not feel a sense of belonging, which will be expanded upon in Chapter Two.

For this section, rather than focusing on liberal humanism or structuralism, a Foucauldian, poststructuralist analysis of power was chosen because of Foucault's work on examining relationality, modern identities and power structures (Monk et al., 2019; Weir, 2009). This lens aligns well with queer theory, given how identity and power can be viewed by Others, especially in counselling.

Michel Foucault noted how "modern identities are produced by disciplinary regimes that permeate our being, defining and constraining who we are, in terms of fixed limits and boundaries of normalcy and deviance." (Weir, 2009, p. 535). Foucault suggested that external factors, such as power, are often what historically shaped and produced identity, ultimately standardizing social categories (Weir, 2009). Monk et al. (2019) noted that qualities of personal identity are, as a result, rarely as straightforward or innate as they may appear. Foucault did not believe in a pre-determined objective self, instead, he believed that the ideas of objectivity and modernity have been responsible for peoples' pursuit of authentic identity—but that this was merely an illusion (Weir, 2009). The relationship between liminality and Foucault's words here signifies that while all aspects of personal identity may be somewhat obscure, those who exist under this lens of liminality may be faced with particular disadvantages due to a lack of unification or power.

The term homosexuality, for instance, was claimed by Foucault to be a recent invention in modernist times, explaining that such labelling of this identity had not occurred previously (Nylund & Tilsen, 2010). Foucault described the invention of this new 'homosexual species' arriving with a psychological and medical need to pathologize what was previously a behavioural act of sodomy (Foucault, 1978, as cited in Nylund & Tilsen, 2010).

Weir (2009) captured an extension of Foucault's ideas that latching onto social binaries and categories such as lesbian or straight to discover authenticity will become an exhausting chase of wanting to validate those pre-defined cultural expectations. People tend to link any of these alleged fixed stories about social identities and truths with their internal sense of self, rather than attempting to disrupt them (Thomas, 2002).

Ongoing tension among further distinctions of identity is explored through this capstone, along with the overlap of how counsellors may influence the decision. Self-identity is said to become internalized through external discourses (Watson, 2009). Examining Foucault's explanations of identity that live under oppressive power structures hints that resolve may be found through considering other subjective perceptions of reality.

Thomas (2002) stated that counsellors should consider their accountability and responsibility of how each conversation with a client can in some way shape their identity. This means considering how identities are formed through relationships, especially in the context of power dynamics. This appears to be beneficial to keep in mind while supporting Others who feel a sense of estrangement from the world around them. For the Other client, possibly focused on their inner struggles, they may be unable to see the wider systemic impacts that power has, nor how they may be able to make a change in their relationship to it—this is where the work of the counsellor comes in, explained more in Chapter 3.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Queer Theory

Queer Theory was chosen as one lens for this paper because of the ways that certain acts and identities have been assigned labels of right or wrong. In her analysis of how gender, race, and sexuality, and their interconnections are theorized, feminist scholar Teresa de Lauretis (1991) first coined the term queer theory in 1991. Nylund and Tilsen (2010) described queer theory as a "set of critical practices that seeks to complicate hegemonic assumptions about the continuities between anatomical sex, gender identity, sexual identity, sexual object choice, and sexual practice." (p. 66). The authors explained that it challenges the suggested form of natural sexuality and some of the binary constructions that go along with this (Nylund & Tilsen, 2010).

Rubin (2011) explained a 'charmed circle' visual that privileges specific ways of being intimate over others, such as being monogamous, heterosexual and married over supposedly unacceptable forms of being like homosexuality, kinkiness, polyamory, unmarried, and so on. If these former perceptions reflect normativity, it is suspected that counselling clients may arrive in sessions having internalized some of these dominant, widespread cultural messages around sexuality. This might extend further into areas of race, ethnicity, and social class. Concerning this charmed circle idea, Barker and Scheele (2016) further mentioned that over time and across different groups, the line between what is acceptable and what is not shifts—but a delineation and binary between good and bad persists. This charmed circle idea may be a helpful aid in thinking of how certain cultural aspects can be either trending or taboo based on the current mainstream narrative. The effects of those narratives are likely to trickle down to individuals who arrive in counselling.

Further, I argue that Queer Theory is not an intervention or tactic to be used but a

worldview that counsellors can adopt. While the primary focus of queer theory may be on sexuality and gender (de Lauretis 1991; Tilsen, 2021), I see the potential that queering processes can improve the lives of those who feel Othered in numerous ways.

The expansive queering of how people see themselves in the world could be seen as a fragmenting of community with people finding their unique ways but lacking overlap with others. One definition of community is explained as a "unified body of individuals" ("Community," n.d.). However, community does not need to mean identifying homogenously. Audre Lorde explained: "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice—between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist." (Lorde, 1984, as cited in Johnson, 2001). Whether an Other finds solace through belonging or community may very well depend on structures and systems more significant than themselves as individuals.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is another lens that will be used throughout this capstone—a lens that socially critiques and radically distrusts parts of the world that often go unquestioned (Gergen, 1985). DeLamater and Hyde (1998) noted a few principles that describe social constructionism well: People often experience the world as an objective reality; people use language to make sense of the world; commonly shared realities are established and may become entrenched in systems; and this knowledge may trickle down to the individual.

Social constructionism may mean different things to different individuals, but it primarily

refers to the different ways that people use language or discourses[1] to organize their lives (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Essentialism is a term that evolved to denote how objects have particular essential characteristics which make them one thing instead of another (Sayer, 2000). Neimeyer (1998) described the essentialized self as "an individual ego who is the locus of choice, action and rational self-appraisal" (p. 136). It can be seen as a way of thinking where an individual seeks an authentic, underlying truth in a concept—this may refer to finding a person's essential truth or structure of something (Thomas, 2002). This implies an assumption that truth and authenticity must exist within words or people and that finding is critical. However, social constructionism, or anti-essentialists in general, often challenges essentialist language, noting that people socially construct their experiences (Gergen, 1985; Neimeyer, 1998; Sayer, 2000).

Social constructionism presents new opportunities to lead with curiosity, embrace not-knowing (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019), seek more context, and fluidly understand that changes occur regularly (Gergen, 1985; Monk et al., 2019; Neimeyer, 1998; Rudes & Guterman, 2007). Essentialist thinking may have relatively inconsequential outcomes, like a person noting themselves to be an introvert, but it may also have much broader implications, mainly if it solidifies someone's feelings as an outsider. Conversations of identity or dominant thinking patterns must be examined through the power that often informs them.

Social constructionism presents opportunities to consider and celebrate multiple realities based on social and historical patterns that embrace a sense of subjectivity while denying notions of objectivity (Neimeyer, 1998). Rudes and Guterman (2007) made a point to acknowledge that

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[1] A discourse can be considered as both the process of conversation or interaction between people and the subsequent outcome produced (Monk et al., 2019). Writing, speech, or images that result in a representation of something can be considered examples of discourse, which typically become repeated and shared in society (Monk et al., 2019). They often become implicit in social engagements and act as assumptions that inform how people make sense of things (Monk et al., 2019). They serve as constructions of ideas, though they often develop unconsciously.

social constructionism itself is a social construction that is continuously in flux and subject to shifting. Further, they explained that from the perspective of social constructionism, the only shared reality is co-created through language (Rudes & Guterman, 2007).

An example of social constructionism could be the way that gender roles are created and reinforced in society. Rather than being a purely biological factor, the social construction of gender is established and maintained as a result of ongoing interactions in society. This can be seen happening at a young age with girls being assigned the colour pink and boys being assigned blue. Social constructionism can be compared metaphorically to an actual building constructed by many workers assigned to build it. In the same way that a building has many contributors and parts involved, social reality is similarly constructed through ongoing, repeated interactions. The difference with social constructionism is that the contributors are not always aware of their contribution, or referring back to the metaphor, the builders may be regularly affixing beams and bolts without realizing they are upholding a much bigger structure.

It is worth explaining here how social constructionism aligns with my use of the term "Other". By using an all-encompassing term for the population I am referring to, such as Other, I risk seeming as though I am essentializing a new type of identity. For the sake of this paper, I recognize that the Other being referenced here is a temporary, socially constructed category that exists in various contexts and changes as those people navigate the world. I am not suggesting that this become a new label for people to use, rather I am using this impermanent label to highlight a group of people who have not as easily been identified, and with that, challenging dominant narratives and the power structures that have historically been oppressive to them.

Purpose Statement

When I began to write this capstone project, I believed that, as a counsellor, I would find new ways to persuade individuals that they belonged. What I discovered was that the overexpressed North American obsession with individualism and self-actualization was a vital part of the problem. Monk et al. (2019) noted that this hyper-focus on individualism that has grown from a liberal humanist movement throughout history had overshadowed the importance of sociocultural factors, often weighing heavily on the individual client and their counsellor.

The counselling room presents an opportunity to resolve this, or it risks perpetuating a lack of belonging. This paper explores how queering practice and drawing on the principles of social constructionism is a way to create openness and fluidity of expression in the counselling room. A social constructionist lens further looks at the ways these concepts are constructed.

This portion of the paper examines various instances of existence beyond normativity. Queer theory guides much of this research. This research is informed by personal experience, detailed below, along with ways that counsellors can best help clients who may relate to feelings of being 'othered' in society or who may feel a lack of belonging in particular social spaces. This feeling is summarized here in this paper through the word ‘estrangement,' acting as a reasonably inverse feeling to a state of belonging. Sometimes clients may be unable to articulate their experiences of estrangement with a counsellor who may not be able to relate. I suggest that there are ways of practicing that can allow counsellors to remedy such feelings of estrangement. The research question that informs this paper is: how can social constructionism and queering counselling nurture feelings of belonging and affirmation in clients who feel they experience ‘otherness’?

The research for the literature review that follows in Chapter 2 was chosen because it captures a range of different experiences from various types of identities that showcase the problem of feeling estranged, among others, due to cultural factors. Further research was gathered to show current ways that the counselling and psychology field have sought to shed light on the problem, along with pieces of research that convey how harm has also occurred. The intended audience for this research paper is primarily counsellors who work with clients who are reflected in the literature review such as those with not-so-clearly defined identities of disability, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. The examples captured in Chapter 2 can convey the frustrations of not feeling seen or heard and the nuances that must occur to promote a sense of belonging in certain individuals.

Contribution to the Field

Current Research & Why This Matters

Current research in the counselling field is rich with accounts of individuals feeling persecuted and mistreated based on aspects of their identity that seemed hard to convey compared to a normal standard. However, much of the literature focuses on marginalized people who belong to specific groups, such as Black, Indigenous, gay, disabled, women, and so on. Some of the literature pieces reviewed in Chapter 2 demonstrate instances of estrangement and the pain that comes with feeling out of place in society or, specifically, within a specific group.

Research on how languages and discourses construct realities was prevalent in the forms of poststructuralism and social constructionism (Combs & Freedman, 2012; DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Gergen, 1885; Harvey, 1991; Monk et al., 2019; Neimeyer, 1998; Rudes & Guterman, 2007; Sayer, 2000; Shurts, 2015; Thomas, 2002). Research on queer theory and queering practices was also abundant (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011; Alvarez, 2017; Anzaldúa, 1991;

Barker & Scheele, 2016; Callis, 2014; Hammack et al., 2019; Johnson, 2001; Muzacz, 2021; Nylund & Tilsen, 2010). Fewer pieces of literature seem to convey the experiences of Other identities, whether those of liminal identities (Hill, 2010; Robertson, 2018), borderland identities (Anzaldúa, 1999; Callis, 2014; Robertson, 2018), or some other term. This may be because no singular unifying term is celebrated for those who feel outside the 'normal.'

By understanding the existing research, counsellors can learn the acute problems affecting specific Other individuals along with what works and what causes more harm. Much of the research (Gutzwa, 2022; Johnson, 2001; Maddux & Winstead, 2020) focused on the oppression and suffering of individuals. However, a gap exists in the literature, particularly in what to do when a person's situation is complex, and a counsellor feels at a loss, though this was more addressed in conversations about cultural humility (Wright, 2019). While clients often seek a resolution to their pain, I believe there will certainly be times when counsellors are presented with the complexities of the unknown while trying to support someone. Understanding the nuanced experiences of a client's subjective experience may be challenging. There are undeniably ways to support a client without giving advice. However, how can counsellors embrace moments of different understandings rather than scrambling to find a solution to soothe the client? My lived experiences provide insight into why this topic seemed significant to explore.

Reflexivity and Positionality

My desire to explore this topic is linked to my history, and this section will reflexively examine personal biases and opinions that drove much of the writing process. Previous experiences on this topic are personal to me, and the research was conducted to gain clarity about

how people like me could feel supported in counselling, along with how I might be able to work as a counsellor to provide that same support.

Social Location and Personal Connection

I live as an able-bodied, cisgender, queer, multiracial man in my thirties. My pronouns are he/him/his. I am an English speaker who was born in Ontario, Canada. Two of my grandparents were Maronite Catholic and Greek Orthodox immigrants to Canada who eloped from Lebanon. My other two grandparents were working-class White, Roman Catholic, Canadians with English, Irish, and French ancestry. I am non-Indigenous, and my ancestors, and I, are all settlers to Canada. The mixture of ethnicities formed a juxtaposition in my upbringing. Time with my father's Lebanese side of the family involved louder speaking and passionate expression—we would eat Middle Eastern foods and I would hear some family members speaking Arabic. Family gatherings with my mother's Canadian side of the family were more aligned with the dominant culture of the region—English was spoken, and everyone would have identified as White (except for me).

My parents and my only sibling identify as White and all have a lighter skin complexion than I do. This difference in my immediate family confused me at a young age. My family often assumed sameness in me and often quickly suggested that I was no different. My experiences in predominantly White, middle-class suburbia in Southern Ontario taught me otherwise, and I began to feel slightly othered by specific comments made by peers. A Lebanese high-school classmate assured me I was Lebanese, just like him, though I could not relate since he spoke Arabic and celebrated other cultural rituals I never had. Other peers often tried to guess my ethnicity. While everyone else failed to locate my identity correctly, I, too, felt a sense of dread when trying to culturally understand myself.

In my late teenage years, I realized that my sexual and romantic interest in men also differed from the majority around me. I soon felt I had two strikes against me that deviated me from the mainstream, producing feelings of intersectional disconnect. Moving to Toronto, I began to discover how so many cultural identities could co-exist, and with no easily identifiable 'normal,' I felt a glimmer of belonging. Still needing to do further 'soul-searching,' I left Toronto after four years and spent several years abroad, discovering how many different ways of being existed in the world.

After arriving back in Canada in my late twenties and moving to Victoria, I realized I would likely never find a group that reflected my exact social location. Camaraderie would have to occur elsewhere. My understanding of discourses would need to shift.

Sociocultural Influences and Research Outcome Hopes

Based on my sociocultural background and the challenges I have endured in trying to belong to different groups, my hope with this research paper is to comprehensively explore how counsellors can support people similar to me. The research and writing process has mainly been therapeutic in helping me understand my lived journey along with tools and ways of perceiving that can remedy feelings of estrangement. However, waiting to complete an introspective and expensive Master of Counselling program is not a suitable remedy for most who feel similarly. My hopes for this research are that I will uncover ways that counsellors can support clients in sessions to see things differently, providing them with new language and tools to heal and feel belonging. Further, I hope to discover ways that counsellors can sit with the complexities of identity conversations, realizing that there is a multiplicity of paths forward and that there is not always a simple remedy. Being able to sit with the discomfort is something I hope counsellors can learn to do.

Outline of the Following Chapters

The remainder of this capstone project will include two chapters. Chapter Two is the literature review which introduces examples of estrangement by specific individuals and the impacts of counselling on individuals like them. The first portion examines literature pieces showing when certain people felt they did not fit in or belong and the pain that endured as a result. The following section examines literature that shows different strategies from the counselling world that have sought to promote belonging. The final section explores literature showing the ways that counselling has perpetrated harm. Chapter Three introduces concepts of ‘not-knowing’, humility, and relationality in the here-and-now that is suggested based on the research findings. Next, I will explore varied accounts of estrangement and the unique ways that people have risen to discover themselves.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction – Estrangement and the Impacts of Counselling

The methodological framework that was used to guide this literature review is an integrative review. Torraco (2005) describes an integrative literature review as a type of research that aims to analyze, evaluate, and blends different bodies of literature intending to generate new frameworks and viewpoints on a topic. Elsbach and Knippenberg (2020) note that a unique trait of integrative reviews is that rather than perspectives guiding the review itself, insights instead arise as a result of conducting the review. Further, the authors, as done here, “let a relatively comprehensive review of the literature show them what is interesting and useful in moving research forward (notwithstanding their own individual biases and unconscious motives)” (Elsbach & Knippenberg, 2020, p. 1279). Given this explanation, this literature review will review different pieces of literature involving manifestations of otherness, how queering practice can create belonging, and how counsellors may perpetuate feelings of estrangement. That will lead into Chapter Three which aims to explore suggestions moving forward with the gathered knowledge.

This literature review examines the yearning for belonging and affirmation that Others experience, along with how counsellors may improve or hinder this. I first explore the correlation and association of otherness and variations of estrangement by investigating three pieces of peer-reviewed journals (Alvarez, 2017; Hill, 2010; Muzacz, 2021) and one semi-autobiographical work (Anzaldúa, 1999). Each piece reveals a unique way of existing in the world, along with the disempowerment, tension, and estrangement that the individuals experience.

Then I explore how various literature pieces show how queering counselling practice can disrupt old, essentialist ways, instead liberating feelings of estrangement by nourishing Others

into more belonging. Lastly, I review pieces of literature that show how individuals can unknowingly be further harmed and suppressed in the counselling room.

This overlap of individual accounts of belonging and estrangement (Alvarez, 2017; Anzaldúa, 1999; Hill, 2010; Muzacz, 2021) along with broader approaches to thinking about counselling (Gergen, 1985; Hammack et al., 2019; Monk et al., 2019; Neimeyer, 1998; Rudes & Guterman, 2007; Tilsen, 2021) presents a well-rounded exploration of existing research. Additionally, criticisms of different counselling models will be explored (Johnson, 2001; Maddux & Winstead, 2020). Throughout, I will explore tensions and gaps within these bodies of literature.

As mentioned in Chapter One an "Other" both celebrates and captures the experience of a person who in some way inhabits a less easily delineated identity. In this section, Others will be represented through race, gender, sexuality, and ability. It is worth noting that these are only a few accounts in a vast ocean of possibilities when it comes to documenting ways that people identify themselves.

Manifestations of Otherness and Estrangement

Alvarez – An Identity Clash in Academia

In an inspiring autoethnography, Antonia R. G. Alvarez (2017) explored how academia and class clash with racial identity. Alvarez (2017) located themselves as "a radical queer mestiza[2] Pinay, raising a small child in a lesbian, feminist, Buddhist, punk activist household" (p. 252). They described a conversation with a professor about the manifestation of the term 'off-

[2] A mestiza is defined as a woman of mixed ethnic ancestry ("Definition of Mestiza," n.d.), in this case specifically referring to a Pinay, meaning a woman of Filipino descent

White,' referring to people with dark skin who unexpectedly self-identified as being White. Alvarez (2017), on the other hand, questioned their way of self-locating:

> Am I ‘‘off-Brown’’? What are the implications of identifying as a woman of color without many of the visual markers of my mestiza Filipina identity? Being perceived as White assigns me power and privilege that I do not always identify with and also affords other White people a level of comfort and an uncritical space that I am very disturbed by. At the same time, it occurs to me that I am half-White—why am I having this crisis of Whiteness? (p. 253)

The author describes how their "perceptions of Whiteness in the academy have come to mean 'rightness'" (Alvarez, 2017, p. 254) and the consequent ways they learn to distinguish themselves from this. This confusion with Whiteness mentioned above appears to affect Alvarez (2017) in numerous ways, with them questioning their belonging and decision-making in different academic spaces.

Hill – Racial Liminality and Invisibility

In another piece of literature by Ruth Cobb Hill (2010), she described the tension many people with liminal identities may feel in her heartening recounting of navigating racial prejudice. Hill (2010) acknowledged that there was pain near these edges of identity, but that there was also a degree of protectiveness. Hill (2010) defined the term limen as “the limit below which a given stimulus ceases to be perceptible” (p. 22), which produced feelings of a feeling of being imperceptible in contrast to her grandparents who had different skin colours and more noticeably delineated ethnicities. While the language ends up assisting her worldview, as will be discussed below, she initially only feels that it is like to exist below others, rendered invisible.

Muzacz – Incongruent, Conflicting Parts

Those feelings of invisibility mentioned by Hill (2010) and skin-colour confusion by Alvarez (2017) are echoed in another academic journal written by Arien K. Muzacz (2021). In her impressive inquiry into expressions of queer intimacy, Muzacz (2021) showed her process with client Z. as they navigated changes in gender. They explored a sense of lacking language around identity followed by feelings of otherness from people around them. Muzacz (2021), in a counselling process with a client, described their experience with someone who did not fit conventional identification:

> Z. did not see himself as whole when he entered counseling, but as a collection of incongruent parts: an academic self, a girlfriend self, a kinky self, a worker self, a neurodivergent self, a traumatized self, and a self with 'mental illness' and disability. Sometimes multiple selves could coexist, like when Z. was in a queer-affirming community space with peers who shared multiple marginalized aspects of identity. (p. 12)

This description reflects how clients like Z. sense many parts to their lived experience, but with this also comes feeling disjointed and separate from normativity. Muzacz (2021) described how Z. felt conflicted with these parts of identity, viewing them through lenses of pathology or diagnoses that restricted their involvement in certain groups. The case study of Z. (Muzacz, 2021) reflects an individual who struggles with self-esteem and questions whether or not they are a good person because of these tensions around gender, sexuality, BDSM, and mental health.

Anzaldúa – Borderlands & Resistance

In her semi-autobiographical book called Borderlands/La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) represents another instance of culture clash, particularly in terms of race, gender, and

sexuality. She passionately conveyed emotion beyond estrangement, possibly fury, that comes with existing between the limits of separate cultures, stating an imperative declaration of resistance:

> So don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, and Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my own space, making a new culture—un cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (Anzaldúa , 1999, p. 44)

Anzaldúa's (1999) writing mirrors the constructed limits mentioned by Hill (2010) and the tension between 'off-White' and 'off-Brown' mentioned by Alvarez (2017). In these words, there is a demand for expression and validation to be permitted as uniquely Other, in whatever form the person requests.

Anzaldúa (1999) explained that existing within the borderlands of different cultures can cause inertia—a junction where a posture of either victimhood or control and power exists. Some people may see the dilemma they face, then choose the right path forward, but others may feel further confused and lost. This notion of victimhood or defeat was similarly captured in Muzacz (2021) with client Z. who initially identified as someone with PTSD, anxiety, and depression and feared being someone who would have a mental illness for their entire life. Alvarez (2017) reflects Anzaldúa's (1999) demonstration of feeling resilient when they noted that they made more room for themselves through radical reflexivity and felt as though they were expanding.

Reviewing these four accounts (Alvarez, 2017; Anzaldúa, 1999; Hill, 2010; Muzacz, 2021) of Otherness, it becomes clear that there are nuances and immense differences in how this positioning affects a range of cultural factors. Between liminality, borderlands, or living with an awareness of many stigmatized parts of identity, there appear to be numerous accounts in the research that reflect feelings of estrangement or difference in how Others perceive the world. This raises the question of what happens when these individuals seek treatment for their feelings of despair. How might counsellors support Others with queer theory?

Queering Counselling Practice to Create Belonging

Based on the literature highlighted above, there is clearly a hurtful disengagement that occurs in the way people perceive themselves as they navigate the world. Those words of estrangement motivated me to review literature that highlighted how counsellors and therapists had sought to rectify similar feelings of estrangement.

Reviewing Hill's (2010) experiences in her journal, the emergence of the language of liminality seems to represent a shift in her entire being that later influences her work as a psychotherapist supporting clients with similar liminal identities. Similar to Alvarez (2017), they question whether their unique positionalities and liminal spaces can provide a sense of perspectives that are exclusive to them, an advantage in their field of research topics. In Muzacz's (2021) self-exploration with their client, Z., we can also read about the beneficial changes in the therapeutic environment.

Still, Muzacz (2021) does not attempt to demonstrate her work with other clients beyond Z. We are left to interpret these qualitative results from a singular client encounter with many unique contextual variables. Reviewing these bodies of literature (Alvarez, 2017; Anzaldúa, 1999; Hill, 2010; Muzacz, 2021), which are qualitative accounts of individuals and their

positionalities, it can be seen as a powerful way of highlighting a unique lack of belonging while also demonstrating the trouble with quantitative examinations on this topic.

Quantitative research may reinforce ideas of modernist or objective perspectives of culture, implying that cultures can be clearly and delineated (Benhabib, 2002, as cited in Monk et al., 2019). Social constructionist perspectives would challenge this, noting that cultures are socially constructed, and no particular essence or truth can be found within them. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, clients frequently view themselves from a lens of longing for truth, feeling estranged for having not found it. Some may find solace in their liminal identities (Hill, 2010), but others may feel fragmented (Muzacz, 2021). It makes sense that many clients would view themselves through a more familiar perspective of modernist essentialist thinking. So, is it possible that social constructionism (Gergen, 1985; Monk et al., 2019; Neimeyer, 1998; Rudes & Guterman, 2007) and queer theory (Tilsen, 2021; Nylund & Tilsen, 2010) can act as an antidote that liberates clients?

Examining Expression of Language

In my pursuit of researching language that could unify Others, I was drawn to the particular term liminality (Hill, 2010; Robertson, 2018). Hill (2010) explained that her new understanding of the term made her feel she was on the precipice of forging a new identity by embracing the dual meaning of limen. Referring to both the starting point of a new state and the imperceptible limit below a stimulus, she concluded that “It gave me permission to strive.” (p. 22).

Embracing the term liminal as part of identity could be mistaken for yet another variation of essentialism. But the work of Tilsen (2021) suggested that queer theory aims to carefully examine taken-for-granted customs or social norms while challenging assumptions of identity, as

is demonstrated by Anzaldúa (1999) in her exploration of borderlands or by Hill (2010) in her discovery of liminality. Tilsen (2021) used queer as a verb rather than an adjective and explained that “Queering is an ever-emergent process of becoming, one that is flexible and fluid in response to context, and in resistance to norms.” (p. 6). Tilsen (2021) continued to explain that the act of making queer a verb can create new space to disrupt old stagnant ways of thinking, instead creating room for new potential.

Anzaldúa (1999) and Hill (2010) demonstrate ways of disrupting old thought patterns. So, if queering resists any perceived singular form of 'normal,' this can also be applied to identity (Tilsen, 2021). Barker and Scheele (2016) also commented on queer theory, demonstrating various opposing ideals of essentialism, highlighting defiance towards categorizing people and critically examining power dynamics that have direct impacts on individuals.

Tension seems to exist between the proclamation of a new identity term, such as liminal identity (Hill, 2010) or borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1999) versus queer theory (de Lauretis (1991; Tilsen, 2021) that pushes for moving beyond static labels. Nonetheless, these concepts, in varied ways, all shine a light on ways in which essentialism around identities can have a direct impact on those who feel othered. The terms liminal identity and borderlands provide new language, especially helpful when a person is trying to convey who they are. Barker and Scheele (2016) also acknowledged how queer theory scholars appreciate wordplay and aim to examine language, making suggestions that allow for new expression. In another of its definitions, liminality also encourages a more fluid and transitory state, a more empowering definition that can be reflected in the work of Muzacz (2021) or Alvarez (2017).

Using the language of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) may show the unique positionality of identities where marginalization can occur, though it does not specifically

describe the experiences of people who often inhabit numerous social identities like in the example of client Z. above (Muzacz, 2021). I believe that while the beneficial language of intersectionality may conjure a visual of distinct colours on a palette can that easily be identified and blended to produce a new shade, liminality or borderlands are more like the nuanced shades that exist on the periphery of colours—often disregarded, but significant as part of the full spectrum of colours.

The concepts of liminality, borderlands, queer theory, and intersectionality all share in common a thread of existing in multiple ways all at once. The concepts, respectively, denote an initial fogginess in visibility, a straddling of many parts, an ever-changing fluidity, and a convergence of identity. No matter what form identity takes, counsellors are in a unique position to offer understanding, care, and support.

Supporting "Others" in Practice

Of the four accounts of otherness listed at the beginning of this chapter, only Hill (2010) and Muzacz (2021) consider the ways that identity and otherness show up in counselling.

Hill (2010) explained her life as a liminal person informs her work as a psychotherapist. She noted that she could support her patients by bringing a degree of compassion to their pain through sitting with any discomfort that exists due to opposites and pressures to fit in (Hill, 2010). She recounts in her memoir-style journal some of her experiences with clients of various ethnicities who embody the liminal type of identity. Hill (2010) explains no interventions or techniques that another therapist could translate; instead, she explains how her positionality as someone who identifies as a liminal gives her access to understanding and being understood by a range of clients. While Alvarez (2017) was primarily writing about research, these comments above by Hill (2010) reflect Alvarez's (2017) words about feeling as though they were

developing through their use of reflexivity to make a change.

Muzacz (2021) stated an awareness of what might have happened if an essentializing approach had occurred, pushing Z. toward some new identity as a man. The author came to realize that this essentializing approach would have inhibited Z.'s desire to explore and integrate the nature of fluidity around gender (Muzacz, 2021). This awareness of essentializing approaches matches what Monk et al. (2019) and Thomas (2002) say when they speak to a more poststructuralist criticism of counsellors governing people's lives, perhaps fitting their clients to match the most prevalent social norm.

Instead, the approach for Muzacz (2021) was to focus on one of the queer axioms that Hammack et al. (2019) call *Gender Expansiveness and Fluidity Across the Lifespan*. This approach can create opportunities for the counsellor to expand the dialogue around gender and expression rather than orienting parts of an individual towards a fixed way of relating (Muzacz, 2021). As stated by Muzacz (2021), the outcome is that the individual is left with choices of what they choose to self-identify more concretely as, in this case, having a kinky identity but more of a fluid relationship with their gender and affectional orientation.

By bringing in a focus of queer theory into their practices, counsellors can assist clients in metaphorically walking with clients through these borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1999), limits (Hill, 2010), or crossroads (Alvarez, 2017), by encouraging individuals to discover the most meaningful positions.

Muzacz (2021) focused on the importance of being a kinky and poly-affirming counsellor using the language of queer theory to support the client. One consideration here is whether the impacts of this work translate beyond the counselling room. It can be beneficial to see changes to the therapeutic alliance or to hear accounts of personal change from the authors (Alvarez, 2017;

Hill, 2010), but it is hard to tell how people may shift their worldview once they return to heavily normative environments outside of the counselling room. This led me to wonder—how can counsellors learn if their clients feel the positive impacts of queer theory?

Broader Views that Restore Belonging

The work of Hammack et al. (2019) emerged in my research as a way of exploring how counsellors could specifically support queer clients. In their pioneering and comprehensive study exploring various forms of queer intimacy, Hammack et al. (2019) defined a queer paradigm that confronts normativity at a series of levels (see Appendix A). A summary of the work of Hammack et al. (2019) suggested that there are a series of queer axioms to match normative expectations, including intimacy among all forms of gender; plurality and changes to intimacy attraction over a lifetime; polyamory; kinkiness; asexuality and aromanticism; chosen families and; forms of intimacy subject to open possibilities undergoing "constant contestation and creative emergence" (p. 558). Hammack et al. (2019) posited that scholars, and perhaps counsellors, would be wise to borrow these queer axioms since they celebrate a multiplicity of meaning, diversity, and imagination. Such developments could be seen as an antidote to feelings of estrangement, discrimination, or microaggressions that clients may face. The authors also added a caveat that these concepts they mention are not necessarily new, but that language and categorization have begun to develop that provide meaning for these relational structures (Hammack et al., 2019).

Limitations and Weaknesses

In the study conducted by Hammack et al. (2019), one weakness of their work was a lack of exploration of relationship possibilities across cultures, including those of interracial relationships or people from other ethnic cultures. While the authors acknowledged the future

benefits in their Focus section (Hammack et al., 2019, p. 560) and explained that their work was limited to European and North American societies, they appear to assume that European and North American societies are easily definable. I was left wondering if they were referring to White people, though their participants were not specifically located. This will be explored further in a section below through criticisms by Johnson (2001) that introduce 'quare studies' that demonstrated how conversations of queer theory often fail to account for ethnicity.

A further limitation of the work conducted by Hammack et al. (2019) was that the study focused solely on the impacts of queerness in terms of relationships, which omits the experiences of queer individuals like the client of Z. in Muzacz (2021). As a result, it may be hard for some of this work to translate into a counselling room supporting an individual client. While these two points may read as criticisms, in the true spirit of queerness, it would be impossible to account for infinite possibilities in a study.

Hammack et al. (2019) concluded their extensive research by noting that "the norm of human relationships *is* diversity, and our science serves the public interest by recognizing and documenting the diverse relational forms that thrive in the 21st century." (p. 583). They explained that a series of terms used in today's mainstream is not yet well defined in scientific studies.

If the science is falling short of the emergence of new mainstream terms, this appears to confirm that counsellors ought to consider queering their approaches, as mentioned by Tilsen (2021) or shifting their worldview to a more socially constructed one (Gergen, 1985; Monk et al., 2019; Neimeyer, 1998; Rudes & Guterman, 2007). This is especially true if the intersections of a mostly un-studied term like graysexual or demisexual[3] (Hammack et al., 2019) converge with a

[3] Graysexual refers to individuals who fall into a grayer area on the spectrum of asexuality and non-asexuality, whereas demisexual individuals first need emotional attraction in order to experience sexual attraction (Carrigan, 2011; Cowan & LeBlanc, 2018, as cited in, Copulsky & Hammack, 2021).

liminal identity of someone who feels something like ‘off-Brown’ (Alvarez, 2017). There are infinite new ways for someone to identify, and even then, subjective experiences of a term vary widely. A queering approach could alleviate counsellors' tension when working with Others.

In an increasingly diverse world, with so many different multicultural factors, we have now seen how clients often feel a disconnect between how they are perceived versus how they feel inside. This section has explained how counsellors can help deconstruct pre-existing notions of authentic identity, while also reducing feelings of estrangement, helping the client to re-imagine identity as they yearn for. Queer theory and social constructionism can help provide an alternative perspective to counselling. What happens to a client’s experience of estrangement when counsellors take different approaches?

How Counsellors Might Perpetuate Estrangement

Counsellor Exposure to Others

By researching the work of Hammack et al. (2019), I discovered ways that counsellors could support queer clients by learning different axioms, but this raised flags about the consequences when counsellors are not privy to such information, or when they overlook liminal or borderland identities altogether.

The study of the politics around identity is said to have emerged sometime in the 1980s and many have found integration, whereas others have felt division (Fukuyama, 2018, as cited in Monk et al., 2019). Clients who sense that their counsellor lives or performs familiar identities will likely experience more trust and a stronger alliance (Monk et al., 2019). This aligns well with Hill (2010), who wrote, "As a liminal, I have been blessed to be able to help patients hold the tension of opposites with compassion toward their suffering” (p. 29). It is worth examining how counsellors may perceive their clients. Monk et al. (2019) noted that intolerance of other

types of people tends to increase because of a lack of exposure to people with differences. What happens when a counsellor senses a different identity in their client? What if they struggle to convey a sense of belonging to their client in terms of one part of their identity?

Tracking a Reticence to Seek Help

If the feeling of estrangement exists, then it makes sense that it would emerge as a problem for an individual in the counselling room. Still, some clients may be reticent to bring up their concerns from the onset of arriving in a counselling office, and the impacts of hiding a part of one's self can be stressful (Bezreh et al., 2012). Clients who identify as queer or kinky have been known to avoid treatment from mental health practitioners for fear of their counsellors discriminating against them once they disclose some of their sexual practices or relationship forms that deviate from the norm (Bezreh et al., 2012).

This explanation of an unwillingness to seek professional clinical help reflects what Hammack et al. (2019) noted about ways in which traditional research focuses on comparing same-sex relationships with how different-sex relationships operate. With research commonly informing practitioners' clinical work, counsellors may be falling into the trap of comparing the differences between their 'Other' clients with how supposed 'normal' clients may behave. While seemingly well-intentioned, this directly contradicts a queerer way of thinking.

It may be worth examining how queer theory can fail certain Others, particularly people of colour. Even practitioners with a queer mindset might forget about factors of ethnicity that weigh on clients' minds. Anzaldúa (1991) cautioned that using queer as a catch-all umbrella term for everyone could mean that homogenization happens, and differences quickly disappear.

One step further: Quaring Practice

That disclaimer of Anzaldúa (1991) led me to the work of Johnson (2001), who introduced the term 'Quare Studies' as an alternative that accounts for a range of identities, as queer does, but goes a step further in locating specific race and class details. Johnson (2001) uses the word ‘quare' to reflect his grandmother's pronunciation of queer, noting a meaning of something or someone strange, irregular, and something excessive that spans meanings of African American culture and experiences. Johnson (2001) draws upon his experience of hearing his grandmother use this word to capture how her specific cultural positionality is left out of dominant conversations around queer studies, particularly in academia. "‘Quare’ offers a way to critique stable notions of identity and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges.” (Johnson, 2001, p. 3).

Johnson (2001) appears to have awareness and caution of creating yet another version of identity politics, but he explained the importance of creating a new language that speaks to racialized individuals of colour who are often left out of consideration, even among those practicing from a queer lens. One concern he has for White queer theorists, which could extend to queer-theory counsellors, is that many fail to speak to their racial privilege (Johnson, 2001). When White individuals refer to essentializing LGBTQ folks, they may assume that this was done unintentionally (Johnson, 2001).

Johnson (2001) explained that a stance of anti-essentialism may discount the lived experiences of LGBT people of colour. The idea of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1987, as cited in Nylund & Tilsen, 2010) may allow people of colour to find a place within oppressed communities, moving them closer to strategies of resistance (Johnson, 2001). Further, Audre Lorde explored the idea that community is necessary for freedom and ignoring differences or trying to remove them altogether runs the risk of further perpetuating oppression (Lorde, 1984,

as cited in Johnson, 2001). These struggles highlight how queering practice could inadvertently flatten identities and further create confusion for some individuals mentioned above (Alvarez, 2017; Anzaldúa, 1999; Hill, 2010; Muzacz, 2021). While this is a more subtle way of reducing experiences of identity, some methods have been far more apparent.

The Expert in the Room – Pathologizing Approaches

Having focused mostly on queerness and ethnicity in my research thus far, I realized that it felt crucial to also research the impacts of the mental health field and the medical system itself. A reticence to distrust clinicians, or ‘experts’, makes sense for other reasons related to pathology, particularly given the history of the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) and the behaviours that were once considered deviant. Monk et al. (2019) explained how the DSM could bring practitioners further away from approaches encouraging an understanding of broader contexts like relationality, society, or systemic factors.

When (Muzacz, 2021) explained client Z.'s worry about having a 'mental illness' for the rest of their life; we can see how such thinking may have originated from the DSM. Using the client of Z. (Muzacz, 2021) as an example, the work of Maddux and Winstead (2020) is helpful when they explain the process of social constructionism regarding psychopathology.

The authors described how initially, behaviour is seen as deviating from the norm and then a group in power decides that a way of treating such a problem can be profitable (Maddux & Winstead, 2020). Soon, 'it' becomes named, classified, reified, and treated as if it is a biological part of life (Hyman, 2020). Once news of 'it' spreads, people like client Z. (Muzacz, 2021) believe they have 'it' and, in their case, fluctuated between degrees of strength and shame.

What this means is that the profession of mental health cannot be viewed as neutral when it comes to politics, values, or morality—these practices are said to perpetuate particular values, political arrangements, and privileges (McNamee & Gergen, 1992). Knowing this, it becomes clearer that counsellors may further estrange their clients based on their privilege and value systems.

For instance, a counsellor whose value system opposes same-sex relationships would be well supported by the first edition of the DSM in 1952, which listed homosexuality as a disease (Maddux & Winstead, 2020). While the listing is no longer listed in current editions, this demonstrated that these labels and pathologies were products of social constructionism and the cultural whims that were accepted or rejected. The work of Hammack et al. (2019) appeared to be providing a remedy through their queer axioms that combat this older, entrenched view of sexualities. The pathology mentioned above could only exist with the creation of a new title, or the creation of a new species, 'the homosexual' who deviated from normativity (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978; Sedgwick, 1990, as cited in Hammack et al., 2019). When Alvarez (2017) wrote about wanting an alternative to "stepping out of the proverbial (White gay man's) closet" (p. 252), we can see how remnants of constructed pathology such as 'homosexual' also inform how people, possibly clinicians, may expect a healing journey to look as well.

Another problem with pathology is reflected in the work of Monk et al. (2019), which explains how mental health practitioners frequently fail to consider colonization or racism as they conduct individualized assessments, locating the problem within a client rather than considering historical effects. This aligns with the work of Johnson (2001), who brought critical awareness to how conversations of race are often forgotten, even in areas like queer theory. Monk et al. (2019) explained that various cultures had experienced suffering that spans back

centuries, often resulting in the "danger of internalized degradation" (p. 78). This theme of destructive pathology is reflected by numerous accounts that emphasize an individualized, essentialized focus by mental health practitioners (Hammack et al., 2019; Maddux & Winstead, 2020).

Conclusion – Still Yearning for Belonging

Understanding the wide systemic impacts entrenched in the complexities of identity is something that counsellors should continuously aim for. Barker and Scheele (2016) validated positions from Beech (2011), Weir (2009), and Tilsen (2021) by claiming identity is not fixed and instead originates from socio-political processes and notions of normativity. Johnson (2001) brought up criticisms of entirely removing notions of essentialism, arguing that there is a place and time for identity politics, particularly for people of colour, whereas Spivak (1987, as cited in Nylund & Tilsen, 2010) argued that strategic essentialism can be used as a form of resistance. Alvarez (2017), Hill (2010) and Anzaldúa (1999) might agree with this claim through their expressions of liminality and borderlands that interweave ethnicity with ways of identifying.

If clients present to a counsellor their feelings of estrangement and despair due to their identity, the helper may draw upon their understanding of queerness and social constructionism to encourage clients how they can inhabit identities based on how they engage with the always-changing world (Barker & Scheele, 2016). I believe that this way of understanding provides new agency and choices for Others to reimagine how they engage with the world.

After writing this literature review, new questions emerge from cultural identity to how concepts of liminality and borderlands might be used. What can counsellors do to reduce the pain that identity presents in some clients, and how might they strengthen the client's decisions in how they want to show up in the world? What are the ethical implications of sidestepping talks about

identity with clients? How might counsellors begin their work with clients from a blank slate and queer lens rather than comparing them to existing normative discourses? Lastly, and most important for the section that follows—is it possible that counsellors may inadvertently essentialize and label identities onto their clients in an effort to be socially just? How might counsellors embrace ‘not-knowing’ with a client when it comes to the complexities of identity rather than forcing them into a box?

For clients looking to find solace in the many facets of their identity, or lack thereof, counsellors can use these questions above to find new insights. One of the primary focuses of the next chapter will revolve around one of the unaddressed gaps in the literature reviewed above. What happens when there is no simple answer to how someone identifies? What happens to those individuals who reject conversations about discourses or queering their lives? How might counsellors embrace a state of 'not-knowing' or one of humility when working with the complexities of identity and belonging?

From this literature review, it was rare to see writing about how counsellors can encourage a state of belonging and closeness, even in the unknown regarding identity. Some, like Hill (2010) may find solace in a new term like liminality. Much of the literature was about fighting for new terminology or new identity representation.

What if we abandoned notions of ‘normal’ altogether? What if we viewed the varying complexities of all people’s experiences as normal? This might honour the fears of reduction brought about through Johnson’s (2001) writing on quare studies while still benefitting from the queer axioms by Hammack et al. (2019) or the queering practices by Tilsen (2021). The following chapter will include these vast considerations gathered from the literature review while

introducing new ways to support clients from a queer, social-constructionist stance that seeks to discover ways of belonging, even in a state that feels undefinable.

Chapter Three – Discussions and Applied Practices

Discussion: Complexity of Identity and Finding Supportive Practice

How can social constructionism and queering counselling nurture feelings of belonging and affirmation in clients who feel they experience 'otherness'? This was the research question that has guided this capstone project so far. This paper has aimed to explore how there is a large portion of the population who can identify with living a less-defined, liminal, borderland type of life. The result of existing in a less visibly obvious way is often one of estrangement that impacts individuals and how they show up in the world. This emerged in the literature review findings from Chapter Two as seen in the works of Alvarez (2017), Hill (2010), Muzacz (2021), and Anzaldúa (1999).

Given the heavy impacts that topics of identity can have on an individual, I have presented a case that counselling is an opportunity to begin to improve the situation through the use of tenets from social constructionism and queer theory. By tapping into these two frameworks and theoretical orientations, practitioners can begin to view life in a more multifaceted way. Ultimately, that honours the distinction that how much of the suffering an individual experiences is not merely caused by their brains. Rather, much of this anguish has trickled down from systemic structures and power relations that have created the illusion of normal while downplaying and sometimes ostracizing by othering.

The current research from the literature review (Alvarez, 2017; Anzaldúa, 1999; Hammack et al., 2019; Hill, 2010; Johnson, 2001; Muzacz, 2021; Nylund & Tilsen, 2010) shows that moving forward, there is much to appreciate and learn from. While queer theory is often known for its complex intellectuality and sophistication (Barker & Scheele, 2016), it is worth celebrating that the volume of research shows continuous growth and vigour in creating a more

inclusive worldview.

Queer theory had set out to promote a multiplicity of ways of being in terms of sexuality and gender (Nylund & Tilsen, 2010; Tilsen, 2021), but the work of Johnson (2001) and quare studies illuminated a large racial gap in much of the research. While the works of authors like Anzaldúa (1999) or Johnson (2001) may highlight intersectional examples that leave some out of the conversation, their voices allow for recognition that this work is continuously unfolding and expanding. Further findings from the literature review in Chapter Two have shown work from Spivak (1987, as cited in Nylund & Tilsen, 2010) that noted how there are times when essentialism can be leveraged and used in strategic ways to promote solidarity among marginalized individuals.

Hammack et al. (2019) illuminated a more humanistic way of approaching conversations of queerness by promoting a healthy paradigm for looking at sexualities that have long been seen as deviant or less socially acceptable. Their work informs practitioners about different ways that individuals exist, giving further opportunities for counsellors to expand their worldview while being able to refer to language that can be used in a conversation that is constructed with a client. These queer axioms (Hammack et al., 2019) directly counter the diagnostic work that Maddux and Winstead (2020) cautioned about in their explanations about how many current labels were developed.

The work of philosopher Michel Foucault has demonstrated that power relations and notions of objectivity and modernity have produced many of the identity struggles that exist today (Weir, 2009). Not just existing in the individual, this produces societal inequities and marginalization among those who do not wield the structural power. A link can be made between Foucault's writings about labels like homosexuality being invented to stigmatize (Nylund &

Tilsen, 2010) and the example of Z. who felt numerous labels that made them feel estranged from society (Muzacz, 2021). This analysis of power relations and structural injustice is crucial to understand at a higher level so that a practitioner can draw from it during sessions with clients, as demonstrated by Muzacz (2021). How can this gap between wider level oppression and the resulting Other's complex feelings around identity be remedied?

Harvey (1989) suggested that contemporary psychology viewed chaos and fragmentation as problems, whereas postmodernism encourages a complete embrace of temporality, fragmentation, disjointedness, and messiness. What does it mean for us to not be able to readily answer the question of 'Who am I?' Can we embrace not only cultural humility, or queer humility, but an everlasting humility for ongoing multiplicity? Further, how might humility enhance a practical theoretical orientation that can support a counsellor working with an Other in session? Another consideration is that not all individuals would appreciate seeing their identities in a temporal, messy way, and some may prefer more precision and cohesion in dialogue with a counsellor. Each conversation with a client would require personalized care and attention to these details since identity is highly subjective.

Applied Practice — Analysis of Narrative Therapy to Support Others

Once again, the inquiry that drove the previous research was around how social constructionism and queering counselling could nurture feelings of belonging and affirmation in clients who feel 'othered'. This section will examine the practice of narrative therapy and how it can support Others. It will advance some of how narrative therapy is currently practiced and understood. Incorporating the research above, it will show how narrative therapy can shift towards focusing on a new type of counselling conversation with someone based on their perception of their identity. This section will primarily focus on those clients who explicitly

mention feelings of loneliness or not belonging in relation to cultural identities that they present to the counsellor. It will briefly explore what narrative therapy is, some limitations to it, and ways that it can be reimagined to work specifically with Others. While I focus specifically on the modality of narrative therapy below, along with suggestions for how it could be augmented, it is worth noting that many of the suggestions apply to the counselling field in general. Counsellors reading this who practice from other viewpoints and theories can still garner insights on how there are always benefits and gaps in supporting a population that has traditionally been harder to immediately identify.

What is Narrative Therapy?

Narrative therapy, a key therapeutic practice, became defined as a term in a published book from the 1990s by Michael White and co-author David Epston, based out of Australia (Madigan, 2019). Narrative therapy operates differently than some other practices, "At the heart of narrative therapy is an unswerving commitment to a relational/ contextual/anti-individualist therapeutic understanding of persons, problems, and relationships. This relational/contextual/ anti-individualist practice was founded on a therapy designed to counter the prevailing dominant psychological ideas regarding the skin-bound individual self." (Madigan, 2019, p. 4). This relational and contextual way of practicing encourages a broader outlook that extends beyond the individual and their thinking patterns.

Combs and Freedman described how the narrative metaphor shows how stories are what allow individuals to construct and state their identities. Given this, they talk about the power that one has to privilege certain stories over others—how some may give way to new communities and relationships while rendering others imperceptible (2012).

This power is largely held by the client who is most acquainted with their own stories, but counsellors practicing narrative therapy also share that power by guiding the conversation. The counsellor is in a position of 'rich story development' when they join with the client and then facilitate conversations about client preferences (Combs & Freedman, 2012). A distinction is drawn by the counsellor between a problem story and a preferred story, and what sets narrative therapy apart from other modalities is that the counsellor is not interested in just solving the problem. The counsellor looks toward an array of possibilities and directions forward and they help the client choose a new path, ultimately changing the client's relationship with the problem (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

Limitations of Narrative Therapy in Supporting Others

I will lead with some challenges and limitations that narrative therapy has before moving into recommendations and suggestions of alternate ways to practice with Others. I believe that these limitations are minimal in impact and unlikely to cause harm, but rather, could create ruptures to the therapeutic alliance or leave a client feeling unsatisfied.

Challenge - Dominant Narratives Shaping Identity

One challenge that narrative therapy supposes is that dominant narratives shape a person's identity or lack of. Madigan (2019) wrote about the anti-individualist nature of narrative therapy, and as a result, a practitioner may be overly focused on the dominant narrative as part of the problem whereas the Other who feels they exist between or outside of binary categories may feel otherwise. This may inadvertently lead the conversation towards a more normative solution which may dishonour some of the Other's complex lived experiences.

Further, this focus by the counsellor on dominant cultural narratives may also mean overlooking systemic factors like oppression and marginalization in more subtle ways, from less

dominant narratives, which may further feelings of estrangement in the client. Also, with such focus on dominant narratives and stories in the client's life, the practitioner may miss opportunities to address present-moment experiences of estrangement within the therapeutic relationship, causing a rupture that may go unnoticed. More on the present-moment awareness will be addressed in the next section.

Challenge – Processing and Ambiguous Language

Narrative therapy may at times challenge or deter clients who are resistant to metaphorical language. To draw from an example, an Other who also has a disability like autism who may appreciate literal explanations and clear communication. They may also face challenges with imaginal conversations generated by the helper. If the counsellor intends to collaboratively re-author an Other's story, they may speak in an expansive, broad way that does not match the client's worldview. If the counsellor speaks abstractly, the individual may be unable to reflect as much due to difficulties with processing and organizing information in the format that narrative therapy encourages. Combining this aspect of autism with other intersections of identity like ethnic traditions or perceptions of gender may create confusion for the client rather than offering clarity. One potential resolution for this could be to use pen and paper to physically map out aspects of the client's story.

Challenge – Reluctance Towards Externalizing

Another consideration is that some individuals may not believe in the notion of externalizing the problem and they may instead cling to these parts of themselves, believing more in essentialist ways than social constructionist agendas. This could be true for people with disabilities who fundamentally resonate with those parts of themselves. People with disabilities

may structure the narratives of their lives relative to the dominant discourses or perceptions of normativity, which ultimately shapes the context of how they live (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004).

If a counsellor had a goal of re-storying how a person with fibromyalgia exists in the world, they may use language that locates the ‘problem’ outside the individual. Although, this could create a rupture if the person holds this aspect of themselves as pivotal and an essential part in their life story. Care may be needed by the counsellor to overcome this by addressing not the disability itself but the stigma of perception of it that relates to the client’s presenting problem. This particular issue may be further obscured if the person is an Other who may experience nuanced health concerns without having definitive labels for their experience or who does not align with Western medical definitions but still experiences matching symptoms.

Ultimately, the limitations suggested above are unlikely to cause any significant harm to the individual, but a client may demonstrate resistance to the therapeutic process and find their progress hindered altogether. It is important for a counsellor using narrative therapy to take note of some of these cases and consider whether the language and style of narrative therapy are suitable. While some Others may have problems or communication issues with the style of narrative therapy, there are bound to be many others who appreciate the social constructionist style that it presents.

Reconstructing Narrative Therapy to Further Support Others

This section will examine three areas of enhancing narrative therapy which I believe are fundamental to supporting a wide range of Others, particularly those similar to who were referenced in Chapter 2 above such as the instances of Alvarez (2017) and Anzaldúa (1999), or the clients of Hill (2010) or Muzacz (2021). The three areas that I propose would enhance narrative therapy based on the research question above are 1) directly initiating conversations of

Otherness and associated feelings with the client, 2) humility and ongoing reflection required by the counsellor, and 3) an awareness of relational dynamics in the here-and-now during sessions.

Directly Initiating Conversations

I propose that a practitioner who is guided by social constructionism and queer theory should directly initiate conversations about any suspected experience of otherness and estrangement with a client to gauge further exploration. While many individuals, like myself, may come to realize that cultural identity factors have had a heavy influence on the narratives of my life, there are likely many individuals who do not attribute identity to be part of the cause for their anguish. Someone could identify as a second-generation immigrant of Chinese and Japanese ancestry who has a disability, but they may not feel these aspects of their identity influence why they have shown up to counselling. To assume otherwise may create a rupture or misunderstanding between the counsellor and the client. What I am suggesting here is that a counsellor first inquires with the client to see if aspects of their identity influence the problem of not belonging or loneliness if it is presented. They may then offer resiliency, resistance, or help shape and celebrate the client's worldview. This would require an explicit conversation about cultural identity and perceptions of self. If the client believes there is no link or that conversations of identity and cultural factors do not feel relevant, the counsellor should not force this on them and should instead respect their decision and follow them in conversation to what feels most urgent.

If the client does believe a narrative of identity may impact their sense of belonging, narrative therapy may support a deepened understanding of the problem and how it is distinct from the person. The reason for the consenting nature and suggested directness by the counsellor is because of the elusive nature of Otherness that was presented in Chapter 2. The initially

limited language that individuals had to communicate was impacting their experience, and counsellors can support them through constructing new meaning, but only if it is first addressed and presented. Otherwise, a counsellor may not be attuned to the problem of not belonging. A client may frequently hint that they feel they rarely fit in or feel distance from those around them, but if a counsellor is too quick to focus on friends, family, and social supports, they may miss a much bigger consideration around notions of identity.

Humility & Counsellor Self-Reflection

A counsellor practicing narrative therapy should have a responsibility to address their relationships to culture and how they engage with them. I suggest that this work be done outside of the session in a self-reflective way or through ongoing professional development. This can mean drawing on the principles of cultural humility. Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) noted how helpers (initially in the medical field) were limited in their ability to be competent around the vastness of culture and could instead draw on a parallel process of both striving to know as much about the person being served while also committing to being self-reflective and embracing life-long learning. The authors described this self-reflective nature as being realistic and dedicated to an inner self-appraisal, being humble enough to say when we do not truly know about a particular client dimension, and re-orienting towards resources that can improve care for the individual and their future practice (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998).

These principles of cultural humility can align well with narrative therapy in the sense that both approaches honour how culture and context can have a significant impact on the way an individual experiences life. I believe these two ways of thinking align well since a narrative therapist may be sitting with an Other and examining the narrative, but they may impose their

own cultural beliefs onto the client. Humility can allow the narrative therapist to embrace a stance of not-knowing.

Not-knowing can best be explained by Bernard and Goodyear (2019), who explained that from a perspective of postmodernism, the practitioner should replace a stance of knowing with a position of curiosity. The authors explained that this shift represents a release of factual declarations and instead adds a blossoming of wondering or questioning (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Those who can embrace more of a stance of curiosity and not-knowing may find themselves being more collaborative. Speaking specifically about clinical supervisors, it is said that supervisors who lean towards a narrative therapy approach are more likely to be collaborative in how they show up with their supervisees (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Shurts, 2015).

Narrative therapy already celebrates the idea of 'not-knowing', encouraging practitioners to approach client stories with non-judgmental attitudes and curiosity as opposed to leading with assumptions of interpretations and evaluations of the client's situation (White, 2007). This ongoing effort to lead with curiosity holds an implicit understanding that counsellors are there to collaborate with an individual instead of taking an expert stance. This speaks to the notion of collaboration found in narrative therapy. Counsellors can work jointly with a client to establish a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1978; Ryle, 1990, as cited in Combs & Freedman, 2012), which refers to a more meaningful and complete story of their life, as opposed to a 'thin story' which focussed on a more narrow aspect of their life while omitting other rich details. A counsellor leading from a place of competence or knowing would likely be unable to generate these new stories since they would be using their biases and belief systems, often found in more pathologizing approaches.

Narrative Therapy in the Here-and-Now

Narrative therapy has a tremendous opportunity to focus on the present moment and what occurs for the Other as they sit in the counselling space with the counsellor. For a person who has long felt othered, I suggest that some of the most crucial work for the practitioner involves an awareness of relationality and tapping into the present moment to gather feedback from the client. For a client who has felt estrangement, the counsellor has a key role in modelling belonging, and I believe that can be achieved through a balance of oscillating between client narratives while also coming back to how supported they feel in the moment with the counsellor.

The nature of a person feeling frequently othered and estranged in life hints that this state could be unintentionally re-created in the counselling environment. While narrative therapy may focus on the present experience of the client (Combs & Freedman, 2012), it is less likely to focus on the immediate relational dynamics between counsellor and client. Making this adjustment could yield positive results.

I suggest that this could be done before the client even enters the counselling environment through branding notions of a safer space where the client can feel free to provide feedback or thoughts on when the process may feel it is missing something. A culture of consent and encouragement to share feedback could be well received at the onset.

A counsellor could ask open-ended questions periodically to gauge whether or not the client feels understood at the moment, or if there is anything left unsaid. They could ask if there are any barriers to cultural differences that may make the client unlikely to share something that might be relevant and if so, to see if anything can be done to reconcile this.

Paying attention to non-verbal body language could be another strategy to learn about immediate relational dynamics. Is a client sharing a part of the lived experience and seems

uncomfortable or quick to change the topic? It may be a good moment to pause and see if they would feel safe to elaborate on their experience or to take a moment to sit with the discomfort. A client may need time to process their emotions around sharing feelings of estrangement or being ostracized for their perceived differences. While a narrative therapist might be quick to explore dominant discourses, it would likely be beneficial to pay attention to body language and take time to sit with these emotions before moving on.

Review of Application

Narrative therapy presents an inspiring, practical way to support clients who have felt othered and estranged based on their lived experiences. Principles of social constructionism and queer theories can be found guiding the way a narrative therapist may work with a client, drawing on a multiplicity of options and the option to choose a new narrative that best aligns with their reality. Queer theory can help celebrate fluidity and uncertainty, while social constructionism can help define new language that feels supportive. This may all manifest through narrative therapy and different techniques that can emerge in conversation.

Considering power dynamics and systemic influences that often impact dominant discourses, clients can begin to see new ways that they may want to relate to others. Discovering that their sense of self may not be complicated but instead be multifaceted is a way to support an Other in discovering their unique strengths and abilities as they move through the world. Taking a stance of collaboration is key, trusting that the individual is the expert in their life.

This portion of the paper has indicated ways that narrative therapy could be enhanced to focus on the specific population that was referenced in Chapter Two. By directly addressing differences and comfortability, reflecting on humility, and paying attention to immediate relationality in session, counsellors can find themselves more equipped to support the

complexities of identity with someone who may feel Other. The nature of feeling Other, as is defined in this paper, is someone who exists in liminal spaces of identity and has difficulty relating clearly to existing categories. There are no clearly defined rules or interventions that can best support an Other, but there are certainly ways of holding space that can be conducive to exploring new terrain that feels most supportive for them.

Reflections on Personal Learning

My intent for writing this capstone project began with a reflection on my experiences with counselling as a client along with my desire to create a future space that enhances belonging and conversations of identity. There were numerous times in working with different counsellors when I sensed they cared and wanted to support me, but a large part of my experiences with identity was overlooked or not considered relevant to the conversation. At the time, I did not feel I had the language to define some of the anguish that I experienced in different domains.

Working through Chapter Two allowed me to feel reflected in the vast stories of different individuals who felt similarly, both in the experiences of clients and the therapists reflecting on similar clients. The language of borderland identities and liminality gave me new ways to explore and research these topics. Learnings of social constructionism and queer theory throughout the past years of this degree have provided me with a new series of tools to deconstruct and reconstruct ways of understanding that are more cohesive and expansive. This paper allows me to realize that many of these concepts do not exist in everyday language and that for the ordinary person who has not studied queer theory or social constructionism, they may not be able to relate to other ways of being outside of familiar struggles. This gives me hope that counsellors practicing from this framework can help to scaffold collaborative conversations with clients to give them new ways of seeing how they show up in the world.

My hopes for the research that I had when writing Chapter One involved finding ways that counsellors can support Other clients in sessions to provide them with new language and tools that could promote a sense of belonging. After working through this capstone, I realize that much of the work was not just through providing the client with tools, but also about having the counsellor be reflective, relational, and present in how they show up with clients. Much of the research conducted in the literature review portion has revealed that conversations of identity are indeed complex and fluid, but that with supportive exploration a person can feel more empowered.

Some tension emerges after writing this capstone given the intricacy of identity. Each individual has their relationship with parts of themselves, and this can make for a resolution that is hard to define. I aimed to further understand how counsellors can show up differently with clients, and I believe I have illuminated some frameworks and practices that show how this can be done at a macro and micro level. More research could be done that investigates how narrative therapy might integrate with somatic approaches of treatment that more heavily involve body awareness of the present moment. An integrationist or eclectic theoretical perspective may resonate most with an Other, and more search in this area could help future practitioners.

Final Overview and Closing Thoughts

Redefining the concept of 'otherness' in the form of a more empowering term of Other was pivotal in guiding this paper. 'Other' in this paper has captured the experiences of a wide range of people who do not so easily fit into existing markers of identity. They are the ones who may feel they exist in between or outside of a so-called normal. With an ever-expanding amount of language emerging to define sexual orientations, genders, disabilities, and ethnicities, there is some assurance that many Others will find terms that suit them. Still, many Others may always

find themselves hesitant, wavering, or feeling uncertain about their ability to claim any one label to capture the complexity of their existence.

This notion of the empowered Other is something that counsellors can draw upon when supporting individuals. Rather than looking for any type of competency in all the labels, a counsellor can practice humility and engage in curiosity to learn about the person in front of them. What may emerge is something akin to the stories researched in Chapter Two. Those stories often parallel the disenfranchisement experienced as a cause of imbalanced power dynamics, prevailing systems of oppression, or even models of pathologizing that exist in this field. While many well-intentioned counsellors set out to support those in distress, I proposed here that there is a large demographic of the population that exists in a state of estrangement from others because they struggle to sufficiently convey their experiences to others.

A counsellor can work to understand the individual Other, an intentionally broad notion, by drawing upon social constructionism and queer theory to consider the multiple realities that are possible and the numerous ways a person can exist. If social interactions, language, and experiences are contributing factors to the change that social constructionism can offer, counsellors are best situated to help impact change in those who feel estrangement from the world around them. By drawing on specific practices such as narrative therapy, they may find themselves equipped to navigate the murky waters of identity to emerge on the other side with a person who feels seen, heard, and understood.

My recommendations moving forward are first that counsellors be aware of individuals who exist in Otherness, and that rather than trying to find a place or label for them, we instead find ways to create new meaning and understanding in their lives so that they can feel a sense of belonging.

The role of the counsellor is not only to give tools to the client but also to model a sense of belonging through an inquiry about the relationship. Does this person relate to this notion of Otherness? If not, then a counsellor can fall back on the training they have. If the person can relate, then a counsellor must be more attentive to the relational dynamic at play. That means practicing humility and embracing curiosity.

Lastly, counsellors would be wise to observe the therapeutic alliance and dynamics in real-time. Does the Other feel seen in their conversation of ethnic ambiguity, gender variance, sexual fluidity, or in the intersection of all these things?

I believe the field of counselling can be enhanced by understanding how complex each individual is in their identities, even when undefined, and also how simultaneously those individuals yearn for belonging. Counselling represents a tremendous opportunity to sit with the unknown, construct new language and meaning, and to relationally connect with a person to model a healthy sense of belonging in a complex, changing world. In the same way that an artist works with the subtle hues along the peripheries of more apparent colours, a counsellor can observe and explore a range of liminal spaces in some of their clients in order to enhance their professional practices. By embracing the ambiguity that often defines liminal spaces, counselors can foster a more nuanced understanding of their clients' unique viewpoints, worldviews, and identities.

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Appendix A

Hammack et al. (2019) - *Gender Expansiveness and Fluidity Across the Lifespan*

Table 1. *Normative Assumptions versus Queer Axioms of Intimacy*

	Normative Assumption	Description	Queer Axiom	Description
1	Different binary cisgender	Intimacy occurs among individuals of different binary cisgender identities (i.e., male/female)	Same binary cisgender, nonbinary, and transgender	Intimacy may occur among individuals of any gender identity (i.e., male/female, male/male, female/female), including transgender binary and nonbinary identities (e.g., cis man/trans man; nonbinary/cis woman)
2	Singularity and staticity across the life course	Intimacy is directed in a manner that is singular (i.e., monosexual) and static across the life course (e.g., attraction to a different binary gender endures and reflects a static heterosexual identity)	Plurality and fluidity across the life course	Individuals may pursue intimacy with different, same, or no binary gender identities (e.g., plurisexual, bisexual, or pansexual; heteroflexible or mostly straight); intimacy may change across the life course, with changes in sexual identity labels, desires, and interests
3	Monoamory and dyadic monogamy	Intimacy occurs between two individuals only	Polyamory and consensual nonmonogamy	Intimacy occurs among multiple partners with consent
4	Role symmetry/equality	Intimacy is characterized by equality and symmetry of role and status	Kink/fetish/BDSM	Intimacy is characterized by consensual asymmetry based on power exchange
5	Sexual and romantic	Intimacy is characterized by romance and sexual activity	Asexual/aromantic	Intimacy may occur in the absence or limited experience of sexual or romantic desire
6	Biological family	Family structure consisting of biological offspring	Chosen family	Family structure defined by identity and community connection
7	Essential intelligibility	Essential, timeless forms of intimacy can be known and cataloged	Open possibility	Forms of intimacy are always historically and culturally situated and in states of constant contestation and creative emergence