
Therapeutic Letters in Counselling Practice: Client and Counsellor Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Therapeutic letter writing as an adjunct to counselling has increased in use by counsellors in the last decade. Despite this growth, limited research attention has been devoted to how clients interpret such documents. This study investigated the letter-writing practices of a small group of counsellors as well as the experiences of seven clients who had received a letter from their counsellors during therapy. The data collected and analyzed were in the form of letters written by clients to the researcher. Four themes emerged from the analysis of their letters: (a) curiosity and connection, (b) consolidation: relationships and session content, (c) facilitating and hindering, and (d) in perpetuity: the tangible and lasting presence of letters. Implications for counselling and future research are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

La rédaction de lettres comme un aide thérapeutique au counseling a vu une augmentation d'usage par les conseillers dans la dernière décennie. Malgré cette croissance, peu de recherches ont visées comment les clients interprètent ces documents. Cette étude a examiné l'exercice de rédaction de lettres chez petit groupe de conseillers ainsi que les expériences de sept clients qui ont reçu une lettre de leur conseiller durant la thérapie. Les données cueillies et analysées étaient en forme de lettres écrites par les clients au chercheur. Quatre thèmes se dégagent de l'analyse de leur lettres : (a) curiosité et connexion, (b) consolidation : relations interpersonnelles et contenu des séances, (c) aide et obstacles, et (d) perpétuité : la présence tangible et permanente des lettres. Les incidences pour le counseling et les recherches futures sont aussi discutées.

Letter writing has a distinguished place in our history. Letters have documented the lives of numerous men and women; they have recorded historical events and been the foundation of many contemporary genres. Letters have also been accorded the status of being one of the oldest and most intimate and sincere forms of literature (Dawson & Dawson, 1909b). Within counselling, there has been a growing acceptance of the value of incorporating written communication into sessions despite the predominantly verbal means by which counselling issues are addressed. Generally, greater attention has been placed upon the client as the principal author and less focus on the written material initiated by the counsellor. Letter writing to clients, however, has enjoyed a modest increase in use as an adjunct in counselling due in part to narrative therapy. The term and clinical practice of "therapeutic letters" can be attributed to this approach and to the work of Australian family therapist Michael White and New Zealand family therapist David Epston (Epston, 1994; White, 1995; White & Epston, 1990).

The purposes of this study were to explore the use of therapeutic letters and gain understanding as to how clients interpret such documents. The guiding research

question was: What meanings and significance do clients attribute to therapeutic letters they have received from their counsellors? This article will commence with a literature review followed by a description of the research method, results, implications for counselling practice, and a discussion of future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Letters can be considered one form of written communication used in counselling. They have frequently been incorporated into individual, couple, family, and group therapy with the identified client as the composer (Batiste, 1965; Diamond, 2000; Lindahl, 1988; Nau, 1997; Penn, 1991; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; Rudes, 1992; Sloman & Pipitone, 1991; Tubman, Montgomery, & Wagner, 2001; Zimmerman & Shepherd, 1993). The intentions of counsellors who write letters can be categorized as (a) administrative letters, and (b) therapeutic letters. Administrative letters relate more to the maintenance of engagement and communicating with other professionals and agencies involved in the care of a client (du Plessis & Hirst, 1999; Steinberg, 2000; Vidgen & Williams, 2001). Letters sent to clients with therapeutic intentions not only summarize the content of a session and perhaps note a future appointment, but also contribute to the therapeutic process.

One of the first descriptions of writing a letter with such intentions was by Ellis (1965), who described writing “diagnostic-therapeutic letters” (p. 27). To his surprise, he noted the recipients of his letters received “greater help from my letters than from their face to face therapeutic contacts” (p. 27). Additionally, counsellor-authored letters with therapeutic intentions have taken the form of “emplotment” (Goldberg, 2000); they have been used in Jungian counselling (Allan & Bertoia, 1992), for follow-up after a difficult ending to therapy (Omer, 1991), for engagement (Lown & Britton, 1991; Wilcoxon & Fenell, 1983, 1986), and for paradoxical purposes (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1978; Weeks & L’Abate, 1982). Recently, the creation and growth of such letters have been cast in a new light by the influences of postmodernism and, more specifically, narrative therapy.

Narrative therapy, considered one of the “third wave” (O’Hanlon, 1994) approaches, honours language and stories with the creation of therapeutic letters as a way to document and privilege people’s lived experiences (White & Epston, 1990). White and Epston described the use of a number of different letters in their work (e.g., letters of invitation, letters of prediction, and letters of reference). These letters were viewed as extensions of therapy sessions. Epston (1994) articulated this by describing them as being “organically intertwined” (p. 23) with the counselling session and noting that they follow each other “like the drawing in and letting out of breath” (p. 33).

In addition to White and Epston’s work, many practitioners have explored and described the use of therapeutic letters (Andrews, Clark, & Baird, 1997; Batha, 2003; Fishel, Buchs, McSheffrey, & Murphy, 2001; MacDonald, 2003; Majchrzak Rombach, 2003; Marner, 2000; Pare & Majchrzak Rombach, 2003; Parry &

Doan, 1994; White & Murray, 2002). Despite the interest in therapeutic letter writing and its growth and visibility in the literature, a clear paucity exists in relation to formal research. Informal research has generally shown that therapeutic letters were appreciated by clients and contributed to positive outcomes in therapy (Epston, as cited in White, 1995; Nylund & Thomas, 1994). These evaluations concluded that the value of a single letter was equal to, or worth, approximately three to five face-to-face counselling sessions.

There have also been two academic-based dissertations that examined therapeutic letters. Whyte's (1997) unpublished thesis explored the use of a structured summary letter. General findings of this study found that the letter was therapeutically helpful to both therapist and client and was a valued adjunct to verbal discussions. Moules' (2000, 2002, 2003) hermeneutic inquiry into 11 letters is perhaps the most extensive study of therapeutic letters. Textual interpretations of the letters were coupled with interviews with the families and the clinicians who composed the letters. Moules (2000) found the letters influenced a range of elements in the therapeutic work and in the relationship between client and counsellor. She noted that the value or heart of a therapeutic letter appeared to be where the intention of the sender meets with the "ways that the recipients allow the letters to enter, inform, invoke, influence, and change them in some way" (2000, p. 199).

The developing growth and knowledge-base of therapeutic letters is encouraging and demonstrates the interest in this intervention and how it may be of benefit to clients. Although there has been much anecdotal support for therapeutic letters, formal research is just beginning to confirm and more extensively map out this technique. This study's particular focus was on the writing practices of a selected number of counsellors and, more specifically, on gaining a greater understanding of how clients experience and receive therapeutic letters.

METHOD

Participants

There were two participant groups in this study: counsellors and clients. The selection procedures for identifying counsellors involved a criteria-based approach as well as a network or snowball format (Creswell, 1998; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The criteria included (a) counsellors had previously written and sent letters to their clients in the process of counselling, (b) the letters had therapeutic intentions, and (c) the counsellors were required to be registered or chartered with a professional licensing body. In total, 16 counsellors from across Canada were contacted by the researcher, with a resulting 9 meeting the criteria and consenting to participate: seven female and two male counsellors. Each counsellor held a minimum of a Master's degree with two being trained at the doctoral level. Six counsellors were registered Social Workers, two were registered Psychologists, and one was a Canadian Certified Counsellor through the Canadian Counselling Association. Two counsellors were also clinical members of the American Association

of Marriage and Family Therapy. The theoretical orientations of the counsellors were predominantly narrative and/or solution-oriented. The nine counsellors had an average of 24 years' experience within a range of 9 to 38 years.

Client selection involved counsellors reviewing suggested guidelines given by the researcher and then discerning and selecting two or three clients to whom they had previously written a therapeutic letter or letters. The recommended guidelines encouraged counsellors to consider the following: (a) select, first, current clients active on their caseload and, second, those who have recently concluded counselling; (b) consider a range of clients (e.g., children, adolescents, adults, families, and couples); (c) if children are selected, ensure they are over the age of eight years; (d) exclude clients with serious mental health diagnoses (e.g., schizophrenia); and (e) although the presenting concerns and issues of the clients are not significant, those who have counselling issues that may make them vulnerable to significant emotional distress if they participate in the study should be excluded. The selected clients were contacted by their counsellor by phone or in person, and the study and its purpose was introduced to them. Each client received an information package from their counsellor, consisting of a letter of invitation, two consent forms, and two envelopes. A central message communicated to each client was that, whether they went on to participate or not, there would be no disruption in their counselling or their relationships with their counsellors. They were also each informed that their decision to be involved or not would be confidential and it would be at their discretion to inform their counsellor of their participation. Although setting the design in this way added uncertainty, as the researcher was not aware of the specific clients who had received packages, it seemed to be the most appropriate and respectful way to invite participants while safeguarding the elements of voluntary participation and their confidentiality. This process resulted in a total of seven clients participating in the study. All seven were adults, six were female, one male. Participants were from across Canada.

Procedure and Data Analysis

Each counsellor participating in the study completed a questionnaire. The 11-item questionnaire explored their academic and clinical background (current place of employment, area of practice, years experience, educational preparation, professional affiliation, and theoretical orientation). The questionnaire also addressed their practice of using therapeutic letters (years writing therapeutic letters, reasons for sending a letter, intentions of the letter, and frequency and components of their letters). The questionnaires were reviewed by the researcher and descriptive information was organized. Three questions allowed extended responses from counsellors and their responses to each were arranged according to shared categories or common practices by the researcher.

The letter of invitation each client received in the information package gave instructions regarding their participation. As this study attempted to keep a consistent form (i.e., the use of letters), there was no face-to-face contact or interviews with participants. Instead, they were each invited to write a letter to the researcher

about the letter(s) they received from their counsellors. Participants were not asked specific questions but were encouraged to share and write about their experiences of receiving the letter(s) and the value and significance the letter(s) had for them.

The analysis of the letters comprised several steps with an overall framework guided by Creswell (1998). Creswell conceptualizes the analysis of data as conforming to a general contour or, more specifically, “a data analysis spiral” (p. 142). He strongly encourages a back-and-forth movement during analysis, which corresponds well with the inherent reading and re-reading that takes place when one composes or receives a letter.

In commencing the analysis process, counsellors and their respective agencies as well as client participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. Each letter was then read and re-read numerous times without interruption or the noting or marking of any words or passages. Creswell’s (1998) recommendation to commence data analysis in this manner fit with the spirit, tradition, and natural progression of receiving and reading a letter. That is, when we receive a letter, we often do not immediately deconstruct it but rather let the words flow as we anticipate what the author will share with us next. Following the initial reading, we are intrigued and invited into a deeper relationship with what is written and how it is written.

The analysis of the letters then moved to the identification of meaningful words and passages within each letter (Seidman, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Seidman encourages researchers to make explicit or to articulate their criteria in identifying excerpts due to the value and implications of highlighting certain passages and letting go of others. In this study, the terms “reactions,” “sentiments,” and “situations” assisted in this process as the letters were assiduously read. These terms evolved out of the research question and the desire to explore the meaning and value in relation to how the letters influenced their lives, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. At this stage and to become further intimately involved with the letters, each letter was also rewritten by the researcher.

The development of categories or “baskets” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 154) commenced in the next stage. A number of categories were initially developed, but the continual reading of the letters generated new categories or saw the collapse of others. At the conclusion of this process, eight categories were established in which text were placed (context of therapy, behavioural reactions, unique characteristics, use of the letter, affective responses, letter components, affective characteristics of the letter, and author history).

At this point, the analysis process moved to the study of the categories “for thematic connections within and among them” (Seidman, 1998, p. 102). Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis: (a) curiosity and connection, (b) solidification: relationships and session content, (c) facilitating and hindering, and (d) in perpetuity: the lasting and tangible presence of letters. Each theme was brought to the researcher’s supervisors for further review and scrutiny. As well, the researcher wrote a letter to three of the participants who requested further correspondence. A letter was written to each of them as a way to confirm and further understand

their experiences. Due to time constraints, only one of the participants was able to write a reply to the researcher.

RESULTS

Counsellor Questionnaire

The questionnaire completed by the counsellors indicated that the average number of years they had been engaged in letter writing was 5.6 within a range of 2 to 10 years. The average number of letters sent to a client was 1.9, with five of the counsellors indicating that they usually sent 1. The remaining four counsellors noted they generally sent between two and six letters when working with a family or individual client.

The questionnaire also permitted a glimpse into their letter-writing practices. The following discussion will explore counsellor responses to the three questions that invited more detailed information from them.

Determining factors in the decision to send a therapeutic letter. Five factors influenced whether or not a counsellor composed and sent a letter. The first was that the letter was an established component of a consultation or reflecting team session. Counsellors reported that a letter was often sent to an individual client or family following each session and this was a routine part of the therapeutic process. A second factor that played a role in the decision to write a letter was counsellor uncertainty. This uncertainty was related to the client's goals, the relationship between the counsellor and client, as well as a general feeling (by the counsellor) of being "stuck." Counsellors described using the letter as a way to ask questions to gain clarity around these issues and to further facilitate "joining" with a client. A third factor that guided the decision to send a letter involved the counsellor's clinical sense and judgement that it would be helpful in the therapeutic process. This was identified as a way of offering additional support and accentuating the client's strengths and therapy gains. As one counsellor noted, she often sends a letter "when I think having an 'extra voice' (input) might be helpful between sessions." The fourth determining factor in sending a letter related to the constraints of time. One counsellor wrote of the clinical reality faced by many counsellors:

There was a time when I was able to limit my caseload & write letters to everyone I saw. Caseloads got heavier from time to time & I've become more selective. Presenting problem may help make decision as, for example, in families where parents are asking for an ADHD assessment. I may not use letters esp. when I'm coordinating other services like pediatric consults, psychiatric consults etc. [for] the family. I think these families can still use therapeutic letters but I just don't have the time.

The fifth factor described by two of the counsellors indicated that reaching the termination phase of therapy is the point at which they sent a letter. Letters sent at the end of counselling were used as a way to summarize and close the relationship as well as an opportunity to succinctly reflect and honour the work that had been done.

The intentions of the letter. The second area explored in the counsellor questionnaire related specifically to the intentions the counsellors had in sending the letters. Their responses were reviewed and two principal objectives or intentions emerged: (a) highlighting the client's story and moments of strength, and (b) bringing awareness to the client of the experiences and understandings of the counsellor.

Counsellors desired the letter to emphasize and bring focused attention to meaningful moments in the clients' lives and to the gains made in therapy. As one counsellor stated, "I want the client to reflect and hold in their hand 'written' validation of what is happening, . . . something they can pull out to remind them of goals, strengths." Additionally, counsellors described the letter as an opportunity to "reinforce points covered in a counselling session" or as a way to "encourage the continuation of [the] alternate story which emerged in session." The second significant intention noted by counsellors was the use of letters as a way of letting clients know their "thinkings" and "wanderings." Counsellors in this study wrote of incorporating their observations and of sharing their "tentative thoughts" with clients through letters. Furthermore, the letters allowed an opportunity to "reinforce points covered in a counselling session" and created a vehicle to introduce forgotten questions, reflections, and concerns of the counsellor.

Components of a therapeutic letter. The third area explored in the questionnaire involved the counsellors' descriptions of the elements they felt were important when composing a therapeutic letter. In examining their responses, two central features were identified: questions and reflective statements. A number of the counsellors, in using these two components, described anchoring them in the content of the session and in the words of the client or family.

The use of questions in the letters was valued by a number of the counsellors in the study. For example, one counsellor described questions as the most important part of a therapeutic letter adding that they "can be more quietly contemplated between sessions." This counsellor encouraged the framing of questions in ways that the client could "mine" their own resources and knowledge and "expose" their own strengths to themselves." In partnership with questions, counsellors described using reflective statements in the letters they composed. Counsellors described these statements as being "strengths focused," and a review of the work that had been done and what the client or family stated has yet to be done. Although the reflections may vary in content, counsellors emphasized the importance of using tentative language in the letter and drawing these statements from the client's story and words.

Additional considerations viewed as important by counsellors in relation to writing therapeutic letters included giving thought to the confidentiality and safety of delivering each letter. One counsellor wrote, "I always make certain how a client receives mail to ensure a letter will not be intercepted." Furthermore, counsellors noted the importance of reflecting on the letters before they are sent with sincere consideration to the words and the possible implications of them. "It is crucial," one counsellor wrote, "that I think through the impact my observations may have (in so far as possible)."

Client Letters

The seven participants in this study each initially wrote the researcher one letter. Three of the seven participants invited further dialogue with the researcher and, as a result, a letter exploring and confirming their experiences was sent by the researcher to each of these participants. Two of the three were not able to respond to the researcher's letters as they first indicated, resulting in one additional letter and a total of eight letters being analyzed in this study. The letters varied in length (one to three pages) with two of the eight being handwritten and the rest typed (on a word processor). Three of the participants received their letter(s) following a reflecting team session while the rest received them from an individual counsellor. The eight letters received by the researcher were analyzed and four themes emerged: (a) curiosity and connection, (b) consolidation: relationships and session content, (c) facilitating and hindering, and (d) in perpetuity: the tangible and lasting presence of letters. The following discussion will be devoted to these four themes.

Curiosity and connection. Participants described being curious and inquisitive at receiving a letter from the counsellor. In receiving a letter in the mail, there seemed to be a natural wonder of the written words and as the letter was scanned for its author, a picture often emerged of the composer. Clare, one of the participants, wrote: "I had forgotten all about the visit and then a letter came in the mail from the [Phoenix Program] & I didn't know what it could be about?" Clare's curiosity, in a way, beckoned her to open and explore the letter and its contents further. The letter also seemed to represent an invitation into a relationship with the words and the authors. Clare continued:

But knowing that they actually thought about my mom & I after we had left meant a lot to me. The fact that they had taken the time to put words on paper directly about what we had spoke about was amazing to me.

Similarly, Katherine wrote of how the letters she received allowed her to maintain a connection despite the passing of time between sessions. She wrote: "The letter helped me feel connected to the team weeks after the session." For Katherine, this connection brought feelings of "support" and a demonstration of the "commitment" of the reflecting team that worked with her.

Consolidation: Relationships and session content. Participants described in their letters the "reinforcement" value of therapeutic letters and how not only their relationships with their counsellors, but also the discussion and content of the therapy sessions, was solidified or consolidated through the letters. For example, Elizabeth wrote:

Overall, the letters reinforced the work that needed to be done in the house and in some ways was a mini session with [Diane, therapist] that held us over until we seen her again. We looked forward to her letter.

Elizabeth and her family saw value in the letters as a means to review and integrate the sessions. She described reading the letter(s) at the table "as it outlined the good work we were doing."

David, another participant, also noted how the letter helped him contemplate further on the session he recently had with his counsellor. He wrote: “It gave me a lot of time to reflect on that session and most importantly it [kept] me focused on what I had said during that session.” Celine also valued the letters she received as a way to reflect on past sessions and as a means to conceptualize and solidify the changes that occurred. She wrote that the letter, “[r]eally helped me to affirm and understand the changes I had made.” In continuing her letter, she wrote:

I could put the document where I could read it often or as much as I needed to. It’s a wonderful document with a lot of very powerful messages because it does show the personal growth and positive side of my life along with words I no longer use like “depression,” “controlling,” etc.

Participants also wrote how the letters they received reinforced the bond or the relationships with their counsellors. For example, Katherine wrote about the value of the letter in strengthening her connection with the reflecting team. She wrote: “The letter that followed the sessions showed me great concern from the team. It was tangible evidence of their dedication and concern.” Katherine continued by stating the letters:

[p]layed a big part in maintaining the bond with the team. The bond was there from the sessions but solidified by the letters. I always took notice of who had signed the letter – how many names were there, especially who had been able to hand sign it. To me it was proof of how many viewpoints were supporting the framework of the letter and the thoughts given in it. The letters definitely held more meaning to me because the connection was already there.

Katherine’s words reflect how the letter, for her, brought focus to the relationship with the team and strengthened the link between them. Eleanor expressed a similar feeling as she wrote about her experiences of receiving a letter following a reflecting team session. She stated: “They really listened to us and gave us the feedback in the room, but to see this written in a letter really reinforced how much they cared about us.”

Facilitating and hindering. The therapeutic letters received by the participants were described as being helpful and constructive components of their counselling experiences. In addition to writing about what they gained from the letters, some participants wrote about how the letters they received complicated and/or added confusion to the counselling issues being addressed. The following will first outline the facilitative features participants wrote about, followed by the unhelpful aspects they identified.

Participants in this study wrote of feeling “validated” and “acknowledged” by the letters they received from their counsellors. Others noted that the letters were a good “self-esteem booster,” bringing “encouragement” and a movement toward a greater sense of “confidence.” Susan further described this sense of confidence that the letter helped instill as she wrote how it:

[h]elped me to process my thoughts & act differently on them. All the letters I have received helped me to deal with my emotions and gave me such confidence in myself. Sometimes a letter stirred me in a better direction.

The therapeutic letters also held value to a number of participants as a means of remembrance. For example, Katherine noted that it is was “comforting at the session to know that I did not have to try & remember their points or write them down because I knew I would later receive them in the letter.” In a similar way, Katherine described how the letters “would usually arrive a few weeks after the session so this would remind me of the topics we had discussed and of the questions they [the reflecting team] had wondered about in the feedback.” Elizabeth also wrote how the letters were “a great reminder to keep up the work” as well as a “reminder for all of us to be responsible to do our part.”

In reflecting on her experience, Elizabeth also brought to the fore how letters can potentially be harmful and noted how they “were helpful but not.” She described that “the not so good part [of the letters] was how my husband would view the letter & bring it up later that night as a waste of time to go.” Elizabeth continued:

Because of the marital problems at that time the letters would end up hindering because it was a reminder for all of us to do our part & he knew that he wasn't holding up his part of the deal.

David had parallel experiences to Elizabeth in receiving and reading the letter. As described earlier, the letter allowed him “a lot of time to reflect” on the sessions he had. He went on to write: “It did arouse emotions from anger to confusion while I reread the letter several times. I received the letter from my counsellor in [August] and as I reread it today it still causes mixed emotions.” Although David concluded that letters following counselling sessions “could be a helpful tool,” his reaction notes how letters have the potential to be not only facilitative but perhaps equally a hindrance as well.

In perpetuity: The tangible and lasting presence of letters. A unique element of therapeutic letters is their concreteness and how the reader can hold, for a period determined by them, the questions and reflections posed by his or her counsellor. In this study, five of the seven participants made direct reference to still having the letters sent to them by their counsellors. For example, Celine described keeping the letter she received and re-reading it as a way to mark her personal growth. She wrote: “I could put the document where I could read it often or as much as I needed to” and concluded her letter to the researcher by stating that she continues “to read [the letter] though certainly not as often.” Katherine also kept the letters and wrote of the enjoyment and value of having the written words with her. She described that “it was very good for me to see them ‘in print’. I had appreciated the sessions but the follow-up letters gave me concrete evidence of how our family was doing and in such gentle tones.” Similarly, Eleanor kept the letters she received and wrote: “From time to time I would read the letter again to reflect on the session.” Eleanor also made reference to the value of receiving the letter in the mail. Her letter to the researcher noted that “receiving a letter through ‘snail mail’ versus e-mail makes it seem all the more personal and caring.”

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

The questionnaire completed by counsellors reflected an active practice of letter writing that appeared bound only by the constraints of time. Counsellors incorporated their letters into the counselling process at different points. The counsellors, however, seemed to value and use letters in similar ways. For example, they intended each letter to be an opportunity to review a client's or family's story that was shared in session. Counsellors also described writing their letters in the shared language of the meetings and in tentative and curious tones. It is of value to note that the counsellors in this study reported contemplating the composition of each letter and how it was to be received, but did not describe if or how the letter was to be further involved in the counselling process. This may have been a limitation of the questionnaire but, as described in the following paragraphs, counsellors following up the letter may hold value for various reasons.

In reflecting on the counsellor questionnaire and more specifically the letters written by clients, a number of considerations emerge with regards to therapeutic letter writing. First, participants' words to the researcher brought attention to how therapeutic letters are intense documents that can arouse and invoke emotions and thoughts in a powerful way. Counsellors are encouraged to be mindful and bring due deliberation (as with any psychological intervention) to their intentions and words, and recognize that the "space between" may leave room for a misreading of the letters' intent. Furthermore, participants' letters seemed to suggest that counsellors should follow up after sending a letter. Each participant was moved in some respect by the letter they received. Their written words described therapeutic letters as curious and valuable documents with little reference to them being a neutral or insignificant part of their counselling experience. Following up after sending the letter can serve two purposes. First, a counsellor is able to provide an opportunity to clarify and explore with the client any misreading or interpretation of the intent, content, or spirit of the letter. Second, providing follow-up allows the client to be further engaged in the letter and the therapy process by giving him or her an opportunity to "edit" or revise what has been written.

Next, it can be postulated that the impact and value of a letter is potentially greater when accompanied by an existing supportive relationship. Participants in this study seemed to gain more from the letters when a comfort level and relationship was already in place. Moules (2000, 2003) noted similar sentiments from participants in her study, concluding that letters that have the potential to be granted noteworthy therapeutic status are ones that will and have been "read out of, and into, a relationship of significance" (2003, p. 44). In addition, the letters received by the participants generally did not initiate new movement. Instead, they held value to the participants as a means of consolidating and adding depth to the client-counsellor relationship and the emotional and verbal content of the therapy session. The letter's unique feature of allowing the reader to quietly contemplate the words at a pace, time, and location set by the reader seemed to encourage this process.

Finally, participants in this study made reference to enjoying the personal nature of the letters they received. Two participants wrote specifically about how they noticed and appreciated the signatures at the end of the letter. This simple yet significant act seemed to draw attention and reinforce the personal and intimate tone of the letter. Participants' words seemed to encourage counsellors to be authors of letters that reflect the humour, joy, and compassion of the relationship and the true character of themselves. As described by Dawson and Dawson (1909a), a letter writer

must be resolutely sincere, for the moment he begins to pose his magic wand is broken, and he becomes tedious and offensive; he must above all possess the intimate note, for without it he will produce an essay, but not a letter. (p. 11)

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The decision to study therapeutic letters through the medium of letters involved accepting some limitations. A central one was the limited access to clients and the ability to extend a "conversation" with them. This study involved no face-to-face contact with participants but relied on the delicate presence of letters. Due in part to the mechanisms that needed to be established in relation to protecting the client-counsellor relationship, voluntary consent, and confidentiality, only one letter was collected from each participant with the exception of one who wrote twice. As such, this letter seemed to invite further conversation that may have added further depth with additional exchanges of letters between the researcher and participants. An additional noteworthy limitation is the risk of positive selection bias because the selection of clients was at the discretion of counsellors. The findings of this study are bounded to the context in which it was conducted, and thus limits are placed on generalizability. Unlike conventional quantitative research, this study allows the reader the opportunity to decide "how the findings may transfer to another context" (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 200).

WRITTEN WORDS, COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study focused on the writing and use of letters that were sent and received by mail. The burgeoning use of the Internet and e-mail by counsellors, however, has grown significantly in the last decade and opens up numerous research and practice possibilities (McDaniel, 2003; Peterson & Beck, 2003; Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004; Wright, 2002). The use of this medium in relation to therapeutic letters brings to the fore many interesting questions. For example, are there therapeutic differences in sending and receiving a letter via e-mail versus regular mail? Would the significance of the letter change for clients and would they express a preference and why? Despite the apparent convenience of e-mail, one cannot escape the history and personal meaning of "traditional" letters. As a result, a curiosity arises as to whether this would be lost through electronic communication.

In contemplating and describing the instantaneous way to communicate today, Kermodé and Kermodé (1995), authors of *The Oxford Book of Letters*, note how it is “hard to imagine an anthology of faxes, and harder still to foresee an Oxford Book of E-mail” (p. xxiii).

Overall, this study contributed to the existing limited research regarding the value and quiet intensity of this intervention. The research potential of therapeutic letters, and of counsellor-initiated writing in general, is rich and beckons to be explored. Further study can help identify and define the helpful and hindering aspects of letters as well as the application of letters in group therapy and reflecting team contexts, and with children and adolescents. Despite the increased use of therapeutic letters in counselling, there is much to gain from further study in this area.

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