

POSITIONING AND REPOSITIONING: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT DURING A COUNSELLING INTERNSHIP

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There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Shakespeare - **Hamlet**

INTRODUCTION.

This article is a personal reflection on the unfolding of professional identity during a counselling psychology internship. By exploring the personal processes of positioning and repositioning in both theory and praxis, I attempt to demonstrate an essential premise of postmodern thinking: that identity (and in this case, professional identity) is not a linear, sequential process, but a fluid, dynamic and continuing narrative, constructed in a relational context and shaped both by context and contemporary exchanges. I hope that these reflections may provide other intern psychologists with useful insights into, and a clearer understanding of some of the evolutionary processes that appear to be an integral part of the psychology internship experience.

My intention in writing this article is not to present a comprehensive description of all my personal and professional experiences during the 18 months I spent as an intern psychologist. Neither have I aspired to analyse the myriad of micro-processes involved in the internship experience, nor to present a complete expose of every aspect of my professional development during that time. Rather, this article represents a personal account of a journey through a counselling psychology internship, along a path which often led me to the edge of my life experience, opened up areas of self long neglected, and exposed personal, but often masked, prejudices and preferences along the way. Although often uncomfortable, the journey was an interesting and eventful one, filled with trials and tribulations, challenges and questions, confusion and insight. Most of all, it was a journey rich in both personal and professional growth.

In retrospect, I find myself reflecting on experiences within a context that increased my awareness of difference on a multitude of levels and sensitised me to alternative ways of perceiving and experiencing. In the process, I began to think of reality not as an objective truth, but as a subjective construct, created and understood within the context

of personal experience. I felt an increasing awareness of the culturally based values and biases which found expression in the uniqueness of clients' voices, points of view and perspectives.

I had chosen to position myself in a setting which prompted my learning about some of the intricacies of accountability, and in which I began to develop an ongoing commitment to learning and changing as one of the key tools of a psychologist. I began to challenge aspects of my self, to accept that my ways of privilege would continue, at times, to blind me to certain ways of thinking and practising. I learned to be comfortable assuming a posture of not knowing and not understanding. At first, I doubted my knowledge and myself; the challenges seemed insurmountable, the learning endless.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT DURING THE PSYCHOLOGY INTERNSHIP.

Traditionally, the psychology internship is an aspect of graduate training that stands out as an immensely significant experience (Kaslow & Rice, 1985; Holloway & Roehlke, 1987). It is a time of transition when students are faced with a multitude of personal and professional challenges, turning points and steep learning curves. Despite widespread agreement about the occurrence of professional identity development during this time, there are various ways of understanding the processes involved.

Stage models.

Developmental models, for example, emphasise distinct, hierarchical and necessary stages in the progression towards an integrated professional identity (Stollenberg, 1981; Blocher, 1983). These models are founded on several assumptions. For example, Loganbill, Hardy and Delworth (1982) suggest that the training experience ideally culminates in the integrated formation of a therapist with a specific professional identity. In this view, different learning tasks occur at different developmental levels, and progress (which may be abrupt or gradual) within and between stages is represented by a sequence of experience and reflection.

Loganbill et al (1982) describe professional identity as emerging through three stages during the internship: stagnation, confusion and integration. In the first of the three stages, the trainee psychologist is typically overly expansive or narrow in focus and prone to simplistic, dualistic thinking. During the next stage, the intern enters a period of intense questioning, instability, internal conflict and ambivalence. This, in turn, eventually clears the way for an unfreezing of attitudes, emotions, and behaviours. Finally, in the integration stage, the trainee counsellor reaches a level of reorganisation, a crystallisation of attitudes and a renewed sense of personal acceptance. With these changes, comes a greater sense of confidence in terms of professional identity, ability, performance and limitation. It is during this final stage that the intern starts to assimilate diverse course knowledge and clinical experience into a more coherent theoretical identity compatible with his or her own personality.

Social constructionist model.

Social constructionism provides an alternative perspective on the processes involved in the development of professional identity. According to this view, identity arises through, and is an outcome of dialogue (Shotter & Gergen, 1989), fashioned through the construction and reconstruction of encounters with others (Hermans & Kempen, 1993).

Constantly in a state of flux, identity develops not linearly or invariantly, as explained by stage models (Steenbarger, 1991), but often erratically and always according to exchanges within a social context (Yi & Shorter-Gooden, 1999). Thus, it is the great diversity of identity-shaping experiences that ultimately defines and promotes its transformation. Moreover, identity is shaped not only in contemporary contexts, but also within the context of past experiences (Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, 1992) and future ideals (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In essence, identity is comprised of the composite voiced and unvoiced answers that one constructs to the ever-present question, "Who am I?" (Sarbin, 1997). Moreover, it is the answers to that question that position one within a particular role set.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND POSITIONINGS.

During my internship, my mind seemed to resonate with that one, core question about my professional self: Who am I? Indeed, I recall vividly the sense of impatience and anxiety aroused by not finding an immediate and definitive answer. Certainly, I could position myself securely enough as a "mature" (40-something) White, female student who had long occupied the position of educator before changing direction (slightly) and exploring the field of psychology. I understood that as a White person in South Africa, I had experienced enormous privilege. I knew well that undertaking an internship at an Institute for Counselling on a university campus attended mainly by historically disadvantaged students would entail my coping with difference on a multitude of levels, way beyond those of culture and "race." Indeed, I was able to position myself transparently and unequivocally in most ways but one: professionally.

As a student counselling service, the Institute was a busy one. Clients presented themselves for counselling and, being an intern psychologist, I used what I had been taught to help and support them. Initially, all therapeutic approaches seemed to make more or less equal sense: the self object constructs of Kohutian therapy, Beck's cognitive therapy, Carl Rogers' person-centred approach and the here-and-now emphasis of Gestalt therapy. Although I charted the merits of each, it was rationalist cognitive therapy which eventually won me over: I liked the certainty and structure it offered. It gave me security and confidence and it served the clients and admittedly, me, well.

Then, serendipitously, half way through my internship, a talented young Xhosa-speaking student, Zondile¹, became my client. Oblivious to the role that this 17-year-old client would play in my professional development, I prepared for the first session. As usual, I carefully arranged on my desk, an array of cognitive therapy homework sheets, ready to select the appropriate ones for him. I felt confident, in control, able to predict the probable course of therapy. In the midst of such predictability, I was ill-prepared for a client who would stroll into my office, move the counselling chairs to one side, and sit on the floor. A position call. Intrigued, I sat gingerly on the floor opposite him. "It's like my axis is tilting at the moment," he began. I identified with his feelings at once. He described the confusion and insecurity of being an adolescent in a "no-where land". He needed, he said, to find out who he was – to discover what ways of being suited him best. Again, I recognised that feeling.

¹ Zondile is a pseudonym.

It was in the earliest stages of therapy with Zondile that I first sensed feelings of dis-ease about using modernist interventions. His reality was clearly different from mine and we were rooted in different cultures, originated from different historical contexts and spoke different languages. It was not long before I began to feel a sense of inappropriateness about framing my understanding of Zondile's world according to traditional rationalist cognitive therapy assumptions. I felt uneasy about labelling his way of thinking, albeit a way that was different from mine, as "dysfunctional" or "distorted." I felt a sense of disquietude about presuming to know the answers to the questions he posed about his identity. I began to realise that it was he, and he alone, who was equipped to assume an "expert" position on his own life.

In stage model terms, it seemed as if I were entering a period of confusion (Loganbill et al, 1982) within which I was beginning to question some of the traditional approaches to counselling (Monk, Winslade, Crocket & Epston, 1997). Instead of positioning myself in the traditional role of a therapist actively diagnosing, identifying solutions and prescribing interventions, I found myself pausing and becoming increasingly curious as I listened to Zondile's – and other clients' - stories. I began to identify and honour my clients' wisdom and knowledges and to perceive these personal qualities as being valuable and potent resources for bringing about change in their lives.

It was these shifts that lead me to explore alternative ways of working therapeutically. My sense of curiosity soon led me in the direction of narrative therapy with its philosophical roots in postmodern, social constructionist concepts. In terms of my personal and professional transformation, the time seemed ripe to begin deconstructing and reconstructing, in preferred ways, the therapeutic world my formal training had constructed.

WORKING TOWARDS REPOSITIONING.

With encouragement from my supervisor who identified, noted and contained the anxiety I felt during this key growth point in my professional development, I rallied to the challenge. Accelerating my personal programme of study, I hungrily read and absorbed the philosophies of postmodernism and the assumptions of social constructionism. I explored the writings of Foucault (1980) and the theories of cognitive constructivists such as Mahoney (1995) and Goncalves (1989). Concepts such as "co-construction", "multiplicity", "meaning-making", "positioning", "landscapes of influence and experience", "unique outcomes" (White & Epston, 1990; Hermans & Kempen, 1993) and "re-authoring" confused - but fascinated - me. My curiosity became insatiable. Reading, discussing, debating, work-shopping, studying and questioning – all the time questioning - I ventured deeper and deeper into unfamiliar waters, developing new insights, alternative perspectives and fresh ways of looking at my clients' apparently problem-saturated lives. I began to experience how it is that individuals collaborate with each other to construct, modify and transform meaning (Gergen, 1985; Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Social constructionism suggests that the reality in which we live is constructed through interactions with others (Gergen, 1985). Indeed, the more Zondile and I interacted within the therapeutic context, the more my understanding of his situation and his culture arose from the mutual, collaborative construction of meaning. Through our conversations in therapy, we explored a multi-cultural understanding of his presenting

issues, both of us remaining open to - and generating - new possibilities, as is a common goal in social constructionist therapy (Biever, Bobele & North, 1998). And, as I heeded Anderson and Goolishian's (1992) warning to be wary of understanding clients too quickly (lest in so doing, the therapist limits possibilities for expanding and creating meanings), so in terms of my professional development, I began to feel more comfortable adopting a tentative approach whilst remaining open to an array of ideas.

Tentativeness was not a stance I found difficult to adopt when working with Zondile. As we worked together, we readily identified, acknowledged and embraced each other's not-knowing position. We had no option, we agreed, since by virtue of our cultural differences and histories, there was so much we did not know about each other's realities. With this spirit of tentativeness embedded in our conversations, new possibilities began to take shape and emerge, both for Zondile's personal, and for my professional, identity.

Rather than privileging either of our knowledges, experiences and understandings, Zondile and I began to celebrate our differences and our inconsistencies, thus giving expression to the postmodern idea of multiplicity, diversity and variety. Through this process, Zondile found an opportunity to explore a variety of meaningful stories about his personal identity and I began to feel sufficiently empowered to embark on the process of re-authoring and re-re-authoring my professional identity narrative. I began to realise that, indeed, "therapeutic interaction is a two-way phenomenon. We get together with people for a period of time over a range of issues, and all of our lives are changed for this" (White, 1995:7).

The excitement of learning to work in a postmodern way was exhilarating. Through the process of reflexivity, I realised that the therapeutic gains that Zondile was making were being matched by some of my other clients. Reflecting on my evolving identity as a therapist, I noticed I was listening more intently and with a fresh sense of attunement and awareness to clients' stories, sifting through them in an ever-hopeful search for news of difference (White & Epston, 1990) embedded in them. Narrative therapy, both with its emphasis on the meanings clients attach to the themes within their personal stories and with its emphasis on the hope inherent in the recreation of new life themes, began to appeal to me more and more. I started collaborating more intimately with clients, working with them to develop plots and counter-plots against externalised problems. I developed a renewed sense of respect for and intrigue about clients' narratives. It seemed natural to join them in taking an optimistic stand against obstacles that stood between them and their psychological growth. And, where appropriate and relevant, I offered to share with my clients aspects of my own life stories. I began to feel comfortable admitting to them that I preferred adopting a "not knowing" position in the therapeutic setting. After all, it seemed an appropriate and transparent way of positioning myself. It all started coming together, becoming part of my preferred way of being.

In retrospect, I understand now how the diversity of internship experiences shaped my professional development. Through the construction and reconstruction of a range of dialogical encounters, I emerged convinced about the value of difference and the impact of culture and history on our identities. I learnt about the therapeutic necessity of respecting alternative belief systems and I understood the risk of adopting an "expert"

position, as a counsellor. Moreover, I sensed, first hand, some of the multiple realities that exist about therapeutic “problems” and their “solutions”.

As I shifted from a modernist towards a postmodernist orientation, I began to work more creatively with my clients. Continually, it seemed, my narrative was changing, opening up new possibilities and providing opportunities for the construction of diverse and recursive positions. A liberating sense of agency was developing. I was beginning to become less dependent on my external and internal supervisors. I was beginning to trust the process – to appreciate the dynamic nature of identity development.

Beyond the spectre of my unfolding professional identity, there were shifts in my personal identity, too. I sensed a greater feeling of calmness in my approach to life, a sense of acknowledgement and validation about my own personal stories, many of which had grown dusty from neglect. I felt as if a space had been opened for me to tell an alternative story – a preferred narrative about myself as a therapist.

Moreover, the changes did not seem to be mine alone. I started noticing shifts in the way clients related to me as a therapist. There seemed to be a greater sense of intimacy and trust within the therapy room. Clients seemed more eager to reveal their life narratives, explore their personal stories, question their perspectives and excavate previously disregarded possibilities. The therapy sessions began to feel very different. Amidst the turmoil and tragedy reflected in the clients’ stories, and notwithstanding the seriousness of the therapeutic processes involved, there was often a sense of quiet, reflective humour, a respectful light-hearted attitude, even a playfulness, within the sessions and, most noticeable of all, it seemed to have a healing quality.

My first faltering steps into a postmodern way of working were a prelude to my growing conviction that life is about stories and when things go wrong, healing can be brought about through processes of re-authoring, reconstructing and repositioning. In different ways, for both Zondile and I, preferred narratives of self emerged through our therapeutic relationship and presented us with opportunities to revise, re-story or re-author preferred narratives of identity. In different yet similar ways, certain sets of behaviours and experiences had been defined for us, and certain ways of being had been prescribed. In different but similar ways, we both chose to reposition ourselves within our identity stories – in effect, to revise and rewrite them.

I found my social constructionist leanings helpful when I embarked on the final part of my internship and I became engaged, with my clients, in the process of “termination.” Termination. The word seemed inappropriate. It evoked all sorts of negative connotations: the end, limitation, conclusion, and finality ... even fatality. The label, I decided, simply did not fit my experience of the process. So, I re-linguaged it. I named it “repositioning.” My clients and I then set about, positively and respectfully, repositioning ourselves within our relationship. We agreed that the therapeutic process was about to change but we reminded ourselves that although we would no longer share physical time and space, our relationship would survive, albeit in a different form. And, as I approached the end of my internship and Zondile approached the end of his therapy sessions, we reflected on our journey together and agreed that, far more than a destination, identity is an ever-evolving, fluid narrative continually under construction.

CONCLUSION.

I realise now that there can never be a final rendering of a story. By its very nature, authoring is a process of finding further horizons of meaning each time a story is told (Bruner, 1986). The universe of psychology is ever expanding and, from a postmodern, constructionist viewpoint, so it must be. We are all continually and polyphonically engaged in a process of meaning-making through construction, reconstruction and re-reconstruction. As I neared the end of my internship, I reflected on my experiences and began to look eagerly ahead at the unknowability of the future. Indeed, the initial part of the story was over but there was the assurance that, as now, the story of the unfolding of my professional identity would be recounted over and over and that, in the process of retelling, different layers of meaning would emerge.

In adopting a postmodern way of working, I have not abandoned completely other therapeutic models. Indeed, I carry with me an optimism that professional identity is continually being crafted according to past and present positionings and future ideals, amongst other things. My belief in the ongoing evolution of identity gives me the confidence to venture confidently, and with intrigue and curiosity, amongst different models of therapy without fearing that I may get stuck in any one. Importantly, too, it enables me to remember that alternative, just-as-effective ways of working are perhaps waiting in the wings. Although I appreciate and welcome the need to remain open to all new knowledges, as a neophyte psychologist, I have found it comforting and useful to position myself in a framework and a philosophy which is so personally meaningful.

I realise, too, that if, from a social constructionist point of view, my professional identity is comprised of voiced and unvoiced answers to the question of who I am (Sarbin, 1997), then one of the multiple voices and a dominant one at that, seems to be replying, "Always, always in the process of striving to become".

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