Considering beginning counsellors' development of "self" in a person-centred and dramaturgical space

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Abstract:

The counselling space is a safe, controlled, and closed environment in which personal realities can be reflected upon and challenged. In training, this space becomes a stage where the novice counsellor/actor is attempting to make a favourable impression on their client, educator, and supervisor audiences. Here they test out newly acquired knowledge and rehearse and refine an ideal professional counselling self – a self that is initially experienced as dissonant and unfamiliar. To examine this transition from temporary professional counsellor persona to a more fully realised counsellor self this exploration takes a wholly Eurocentric stance in its conscious decision to present two seminal counselling and sociological theories. Carl Rogers's (1961) distinguished and influential theory of self, and Erving Goffman's (1969) unconventional dramaturgy of self-presentation, which uses the imagery of theatre to examine face-to-face interactions. In the former, and exemplified in their working relations with clients, beginning counsellors aspire to become independent, fully functioning persons. In the latter, counsellors in training are effective as actors when their collaborative work with clients achieves mutually believable and successful performances. This discussion invites further comment from counsellors, educators and supervisors on the value of considering this normative phase in the beginning counsellor's training from diverse perspectives.

Key Words: Carl Rogers, counsellor development, dramaturgy, Erving Goffman, person-centred approach, persona, the self

Considering beginning counsellors' development of "self" in a person-centred and dramaturgical space[1]

In talking therapies, the interpersonal richness of the relationship between counsellor and client is considered paramount (Cooper, 2008; Rogers, 1957). Consequently, how counsellors learn to understand and flexibly negotiate the "relative positions of self and other" is crucial in sharing client change (Bondi & Fewell, 2003). Viewed from this perspective, this article assumes that the developing beginning counsellor's authentic "self" is a fundamental tool in their client work, and often the most challenging for them to facilitate. The accepted notion of the counsellor role is that, without cynicism, the professional presents an effective "persona" or mask for the benefit of the client (Jung, 1966). However, meeting counselling practice requirements to be authentic and genuine with clients, whilst simultaneously accepting one's self and presenting a professional service role, is one of the many contradictions that a counsellor must reconcile during their education (Rowan & Jacobs, 2003).

As a primary intervention of many humanistic approaches, developing the therapeutic relationship is the gold standard of counselling and its effective achievement, the Holy Grail for many beginning counsellors. Person-centred practices (PCP) emphasise personal authenticity alongside the establishment of core relational conditions that optimise the counselling experience. These core conditions, internalised attitudes or experiential attributes are communicated to the client through: genuineness and unconditional acceptance and valuing; empathic understanding; and an attitude free from judgement or advice (Rogers, 1957). In the early student phases of psycho-professional development a major focus of practice is how to communicate these instrumental aspects of the self, to control and set aside emotional responses, and suppress knee-jerk reactions to client material (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Realising these conditions and establishing effective counselling relationships is a struggle for trainees because the conflation of their "less-than-

perfect" selves with such idealised characteristics is experienced as an "act, a form of role-playing" that seems, in the spirit of the profession, dishonest and hypocritical (Rowan & Jacobs, 2002). Unsurprisingly, students, more concerned with making good professional impressions, are less concerned with being real, genuine, open, and responsive to clients. Such seemingly artificial "front-stage" performances emphasise the acquisition and performance of new skills and techniques rather than their accommodation, or contribution towards, an emerging counsellor-self.

According to Erving Goffman's sociological theory, and through his use of metaphor to describe everyday social life, a counselling relationship may also be viewed as a service interaction between a counsellor as the service provider, and a client as the recipient of that service. It is suggested here that by viewing counselling, in the first instance, as a service relationship, the beginning counsellor may feel freer to examine the incongruence that exists between the inner representation of the self and its outer presentation in the counsellor persona (Rowan & Jacobs, 2003). By applying Erving Goffman's (1969) dramaturgical treatment of "impression management" to training experiences, this article discusses the challenge of coming into the role. It also identifies the counselling session as a stage upon which students, garbed in ill-fitting skills and techniques, which they should grow into, self-consciously rehearse loose theoretical scripts that present their emerging counsellor selves to clients while their educators direct and observe them from the wings. Back-stage, critically examining the effectiveness of these self-performances, and consoled by the fact that familiarity with the role will increase confidence and diminish stage-fright, they begin to resolve the dissonance between their front- and back-stage presentations of self. Nonetheless, it is a struggle to recognise and accept the differences between these two positions and how their integration and resolution will ultimately impact and shape their future counsellor roles.

Background

This article intentionally draws upon two classical orientations that might be encountered by beginning counsellors in their struggle to be authentic as a counsellor in a counselling relationship. Carl Rogers's (1961) seminal "theory of self"[2] conventionally foregrounds this discussion because of its powerful presence over the past five decades in Aotearoa New Zealand's counsellor education programmes. Over time the theory and practice of Rogers's (1951; 1957) humanistic person-centred approach (PCA) to counselling has played an important part in shaping the ways in which counselling in Aotearoa is understood today. However, it is also noted that what is taught has been, on the whole, a necessarily paired down interpretation of Rogers's original oeuvre. "Whilst many programmes teach the so called "core conditions" as a central component to their courses, these are predominantly seen as a starting point for the therapeutic process…" (Tudor & Rodgers, 2021, p. 94). Consequently, how beginning counsellors in our counsellor education programmes experience, understand and negotiate this "starting point" will be the primary focus of the present article. Erving Goffman's (1969) lesser known and relatively unconventional dramaturgical conceptualisation of self in relationship is then hypothetically compared to the PCA, and the author speculates on how beginning counsellors might come to a closer understanding of self in counselling relationship when a Goffmanesque lens is applied. Unsurprisingly, this treatment of the subject arose from the author's observations and experience as a counsellor educator and supervisor with beginning counsellors, and as a teacher of drama. As Goffman's perspective seems to resonate with beginning counsellors' experiences of disorientation and self-consciousness as they feel their way into their new roles, it was important to explore it further and conclude the article around it.

Finally, before reading on, it is important to acknowledge that two important contributions to this discussion have been omitted: firstly, an overview of the development of the two major theories, particularly regarding literature on the later development of the theory of self; secondly, any comment on the subject's relevance to the cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, and particularly on Māori identity and wellbeing[3]. By simply juxtaposing these two classic orientations, the reader is challenged to reconsider how the therapeutic encounter could look from a novice counsellor's perspective, and to contemplate the impact that the experience can have on their developing professional identity and practice as a future counsellor in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The counsellor, the persona, and the developing self

It can be hugely reassuring for counselling students and educators to understand that the development of a flexible persona congruent with one's "true" or authentic self is a process that takes time.

Although the "action" of counselling utilises naturally occurring skills that become enhanced by training, being a counsellor is more complex than simply assuming a role. Trainees want to be better than "good enough" and constantly compare themselves with the "ideal" that trainers and theories model for them, which creates a seemingly irresolvable conflict between their perception of their present self and its achievement in a professional persona. In pursuit of this ideal trainees can underestimate personal qualities of genuineness and authenticity and think themselves unworthy, denying themselves full engagement in sessions. Students may experience training, weighted to demonstrate knowledge and skills, much more about accommodation, adaptation, and overcoming resistance to the adoption of personas that initially feel uncomfortably inauthentic (Demaris, 1988). It is then they realise that being a counsellor is more than mimicking service interactions.

The struggle towards authenticity involves exposing and risking self in the counselling role (Jacoby, 1992; Harter, 2012; Casement, 2006), which in time will develop a persona that can perform all social roles (Hannah, 1976). It is a battleground for beginners struggling to accommodate and accept a conscious state of disequilibrium in order to individuate (Mills, 2003).

However, developing beyond the pretence and obligation of superficially communicating a socially acceptable image, they become self-respectful, self-reliant, and appreciative of their strengths and weaknesses. Consequently, educators assist students to develop "a more realistic, flexible persona that helps them navigate society but does not collide with nor hide their true self" (Wehr, 1988, p. 57). Thus, the source of inner conflict is not the adoption of the role per se but the fact that its incongruence poses a constant threat to, and impact on, the student's self.

The Rogerian self as it applies to the development of counselling students

Not unlike its predecessors, Carl Rogers's humanistic approach to counselling situates the self "in the empirical realm of psychological research and in the conceptual realm of philosophy" (Rowan, 1983, p. 62) which, in his respect for the guiding principle of the self and the individual, led him to formulate a model of the "fully functioning person" (Rogers, 1961, p. 183). This person, at a fundamental level, trusts, values, and accepts themselves as worthy. Rogers organises personality in terms of a self-concept, which has **three components**: **self-worth,** the self-esteem formed in early attachments; **self-image, an understanding of how an individual is in the world and the affect this has on self and other; and the ideal self,** an ever-changing perception of how an individual would like to be. The theory and practice of the PCA, therefore, champions the subjective and self-reported awareness of conscious experiences and the achievement of congruence between the self-concept and the ideal self (Rogers, 1951). Thus, given the therapeutic conditions of genuineness, listening, empathy, and emotional vulnerability, the incongruence of clients' direct organismic experiences and the unrealistic desires of the idealised self become exposed. The client learns that these desires are a source of dissatisfaction, psychological distress and anxiety, and the revelation relieves psychological tension and facilitates change in the self. In addition, Rogers's concept of self has an energetic capacity to evolve beyond its current potential, to be self-directing and actualising (see also, Assagioli, 1994; Goldstein, 1939; Maslow, 1968).

Typically, existential, and humanistic therapeutic practices employ interventions that "support and re-establish a sense of self and personal authenticity" (Rowan, 1983, pp. 62–63). Client goals are to achieve an understanding that the persona, or the "ordinary ego… which other people know us by", protects the self from pain (p. 59). Thus, after the careful removal of "elaborate facades" and negative "encrusted psychological defences" (Rogers, 1989, pp. 135–156), the "perfectly ordinary and perfectly ecstatic" self is revealed beneath (Rowan, 1983, p. 65).

Many trainees are all too aware that, in the light of their earlier life experiences, the only differences between themselves and their clients is training, self-awareness and agency. But as PCT assumes that most individuals possess selves that are tangible and therapeutically resolvable, it also understands that effective counselling will only be fully accomplished by counsellors when they are able to recognise and trust in their real selves This is why beginning counsellors are often recommended

to undertake their own personal work. Unsurprisingly, it is not unusual for novice counsellors to feel the need to defend their self from perceived feelings of ineptitude, weakness, worthlessness, or a needy self, by donning a protective mask or persona (Laing, 1977), and to resist their own call to change.

Using introspection and self-awareness, counselling is impelled and enhanced by the experiential dynamic of the relational self. Consequently, Rogerian practice, with its optimistic view of human nature and positive client orientation, encourages this facilitative role. Trainee counsellors who are encouraged to enter the "therapeutic encounter as an active, dynamic, really real human being" (Cooper, 2021) assist clients to experience their real selves. Students are required to know their own selves while simultaneously being present to, and in psychological contact with, their clients (see, Howard, 2005). Consequently, students begin to recognise and manage the balance between "doing to" and "being with" clients, and learn what it is to be mutually connected and intimately "affected by the client" (Mearns & Cooper, 2005, p. 11). Trainees are encouraged to listen deeply, employ intuitive interpersonal exploration, and to only use techniques or interventions that directly respond to their clients' emerging selves.

Accepting that the ultimate acquisition of a fully integrated self and persona is a fundamental goal of counsellor development, the literature also cautions that it is not necessarily a prerequisite for effective counselling, suggesting that a counsellor with a highly skilled counsellor persona can be just as effective (Cooper, 2008). According to this argument, the counsellor persona might better be understood as providing a basic structure in which to grow counsellor confidence, self-acceptance, and competence, and to support actualisation. If so, this is a beginning developmental phase that eventually prepares the counsellor self to engage with increasing comfort in relationally deep counselling encounters (Mearns & Cooper, 2018). Thus, effective counsellors will not only provide the conditions necessary for client growth but exemplify them.

The Goffmanesque self in relation to the developmental process of counselling students

Like Rogers, Goffman's (1969) symbolic interactionist, dramaturgical approach also notes the conditions, circumstances, and behaviours required for effective social transactions to be optimally achieved. While Goffman attends to the meaning and minutiae of day-to-day relationships from a sociological perspective,

both approaches recognise that participants in an interaction consciously or unknowingly "give" and "give off" to each other to affect change (also refer to Appelrouth & Edles, 2008, 478–517; Blumer, 1969). Arguably, these performances are opportunities for counsellors and clients to both share or withhold aspects of their selves.

Goffman proposes that reality is socially constructed and that through performative communication the self, as a tangible product of social interaction, has agency, rather than being an unconscious entity. The self's uniqueness, or core of being, therefore, is only discernible as a "product of 'joint ceremonial labor'" (Smith, 2006, p. 96). Although he does not specifically discuss the presentation of self in counselling relationships, the final part of this article will take the opportunity to consider the beginning counsellors' experiences of training more fully through the dramaturgical language and concepts of Goffman's "interaction order" (Smith, 2006, p. 97). Goffman's thesis that human beings self-consciously engage in socially defined face-to-face encounters designed to manage impressions of the self, suggests that the management and trust that exists in everyday communications co-operatively maintains a form of social order.

Goffman's unconventional and playful perspectives on impression management and communication will also be used to invite comment upon the beginning counsellor's struggle toward authenticity in the therapeutic relationship. Through his dramaturgical lens counselling interactions are viewed as ritualised, staged, scripted, and rehearsed performances in which counsellor trainees see themselves as actors in a role. However, as it is only in a relationship that the selves are truly revealed and accessible, Goffman's interaction order supplies a protective framework for their fragile public social selves to safely organise and manage "the relation between [the] desires and the expectations" associated with coming into their counsellor roles (Smith, 2006, p. 69; see also, Roberts, 2006).

Notwithstanding that the services that counsellors provide are bound by a code of ethics, Goffman argues that even specialist service interactions that require a level of personal engagement are mostly dictated, or framed, by their purpose. From a dramaturgical position, counsellors and clients are therefore actors in the social establishment of the counselling room, the former assuming a counsellor persona, "front," "face", or identity to elicit acceptance and approval of the other. Thus, the identities that emerge in these performances are likely to be truer to "the self we would like to be" (Park, 1950, pp 249–250), and the actors' performances are

measured by their capacities to be perceived as they choose to be. Goffman's use of dramaturgical terminology advances Mead's notion of multiple selves for multiple interactions and Park's concept that the individual employs two interactive selves, the performer and his mask (Smith, 2006). It also anticipates Hermans's (1992; 2001)[4] notion of a dialogical self.

Goffman's interaction order suggests that the self and its presentation be regarded as sacred, each interaction determining which of the many "selves" will be called forth and how future transactions will be conducted. Within these interactive processes co-exist a persistently real self, a phenomenon hidden behind the scenes that amorally manipulates or directs self-impressions, and a "morally ambiguous" dramaturgical self, a social construct momentarily understood in, and driven by, the role being played (Smith, 2006, p. 106; see also, Jacoby, 1992). *Goffman's Presentation of Self* (1969) suggests that social interactions offer opportunities to play out character roles in well-organised and defined situations in which individuals intentionally present carefully selected facets of the self for the general approval of their audiences.

To an academy that universally emphasises the authenticity of self in the therapeutic relationship, the idea of counselling as a socially mediated performance, and the counsellor as an actor engaged in impressing his client-audience, seems paradoxical (McLeod[, 1999)]. Nevertheless, although Goffman's "performances" lead others to "act voluntarily in accordance with his [the actor's] own plans" (Goffman, 1967, pp. 4, 84), they also involve seeing one's self as others do, anticipating responses to behaviours that enable both parties to work smoothly together, defining the situation, and completing others' self-images. Far from disingenuous, performers as "merchant[s] of morality" are also obliged to live up to the impressions that they present and maintain the role (Goffman, 1971, pp. 241–244). This aligns with the research suggesting that on its own a relationship may be of less value to a client than a convincingly performed counselling interaction that offers interventions that can be readily received and used (Cooper, 2008).

However contrived, the client's experience of authenticity still lies at the heart of the matter.

Goffman's analysis of the dramaturgical themes of social management suggests that "life itself is a dramatically enacted thing" (Goffman, 1969, p. 78), or, as Laing (1977) suggests, "A man without a mask is indeed very rare. . . . In 'ordinary' life it seems hardly possible for it to be otherwise" (p. 95). Thus, social performances allow participants to see themselves simultaneously as object, subject, actor,

director, and audience, and the actors develop their abilities to produce considered and seamless performances that present their selves coherently and consistently whilst simultaneously adjusting to different settings.

Dramaturgical treatment of the counsellor's presentation of self

The new student's introduction to counsellor education

Typically, new trainees in counselling programmes have some knowledge of what counselling is but little or no formal training in skills or models of practice. The trainee struggles with two "contradictory impulses: enthusiasm for the new venture and intimidation about the complex tasks of professional counselling . . . particularly its contrast to everyday discourse" (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003, p. 53), which can inevitably challenge their current worldview, character, behaviour, relationships, and core values. In this self-focused phase, they work sympathetically, rather than empathically; adopt a common-sense, expert position; and provide emotional support and advice based on their own experience. For these beginners the client and the problem are interchangeable, like a broken object or system that requires fixing (see Goffman's 1961 "repair cycle").

Similarly, novice counsellors can oscillate between powerlessness and being overly protective with clients, finding it hard to manage their personal and professional boundaries or control their emerging skills (McAuliffe et al., 2011).

Initially, trainees are concrete and self-conscious, taking educators, the exercise of their skills and interventions, and the models that underpin their practice quite literally (McAuliffe et al., 2011). However, as imitators they become more rehearsed in both understanding and practice, internalise their learning and translate it into a practice style that accommodates personal judgements and control, openness, flexibility, and creativity. Encouraged to try out different counselling approaches and styles, they imitate the actions of their educators, supervisors, and those celebrated counsellors whom they have read about or watched.

To further strengthen developing counsellor personas, educators task them to create and rehearse multi-purpose scripts and interventions that they know are effective in counselling relationships, and these staged rehearsals of practice are performed for critically appreciative audiences of peers, educators, and supervisors.

Whilst these counselling performances do not endure as exemplars of practice, with careful supervision, "constructive feedback, self-reflection, and risk taking" any disadvantageous effects caused by extreme levels of impression management can be offset (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 53).

In this section it is suggested that the rehearsals of practice described above, as well as developing skills, also provide formative experiences that test and influence the student's counsellor persona. Examining the counsellor persona in dramaturgical terms allows new counsellors to differentiate between who they believe themselves to be, the roles they are about to perform, and the impact of appropriating those things that will assist them to manage "the task of creating a self that is not there until it is performed" (McNamee, 2004, p. 45). In his preface, Goffman (1969) suggests that it is through the relational activities of interchangeable and durable personas that the social self becomes visible. His work discusses the ways that individuals present themselves and their activities to others, and how this may guide and modify "the impression[s] they form" (p.1), and their engagement in subsequent performances. Although Goffman did not write specifically about the performances entailed in counselling encounters, the following treatment broadly adapts his hypothesis concerning service relationships to the psycho-social career and development of beginning counsellors. Therefore, in a Goffmanesque spirit, this section will make some broad assumptions about what he might have said had he written on the subject.

Counselling students' use of Goffman's dramaturgical constructs

1. **The use front and back settings in counselling performances**

   Goffman's most well-known concept in human theatre is "front" and "back". These refer to the regions of reality where individuals make presentations or impressions in the presence of others. It is in the front region where beginning counsellors start to respond to the formal aspects of the role for the first time. It is the region where they begin to present counsellor personas of limited functionality, structured largely from the parental-like introjections of trainers, their own experiences of what is appropriate when acting in a social role, and the expectations of their peers. Initially, this student persona serves to mute or disguise their less appropriate relational characteristics and promote those that make a good impression. Looking at both regions, it is like a student performing virtuoso routines in the counselling skills training sessions in ways that give the

impression of confidence and competence to trainers, but taking much safer or modest roles with peers socially off campus – in the back (Jacoby, 1992). As the counsellor persona becomes more central to the student's identity these routines also serve to promote professional reputation. Models of counsellor education exemplify this process. "The basic mental model is of a controlling intellect moulding and training a possibly recalcitrant set of emotions, bodily reactions, unconscious responses or whatever else" (Rowan & Jacobs, 2002, p.16).

Thus, in the front stage region of a counselling practice session, performers/counsellors know that they are being observed and that they have the power to control their performances. However, counsellors also feel compelled to model a greater level of social honesty. They assist clients to adjust to their own performances, their selves as performers, and learn to create conditions where clients do not have to misrepresent themselves or be humiliated by doing so. Nevertheless, even though they are not intending to self-misrepresent counsellors can present objectified, idealised, or mystifying versions of themselves. Goffman condemns misrepresentations by performers as offensive strategies designed to take advantage or protect the self. False impressions, he suggests, jeopardise relationships and taint what is good and honest in all areas of performance. Ultimately, the veracity of the actor in performance affects the audience's willingness to accept and trust the particular persona presented.

While the communication of impressions is just as fragile an exercise in the back stage region as it is in the front, counsellors will generally only use the back to rest their professional personas and be more "sincere" in another role completely (McNamee, 2004, p. 46). A common feature, however, is that both regions incorporate a defined space, or "setting" where the props and scenery of performance create a believable scene. For example, in training settings students are provided with numerous props that are signifiers of their student and counselling identities – the roles that they are preparing to play and make their own. Props might include texts on counselling theory, practice exempla, common-sense counselling tools and accessories, scripts to follow, and a new, sometimes impenetrable, language to be convincingly deployed in the role.

Formal counselling encounters normally occur in the front, in time limited settings where the actors can be safe and psychologically comfortable and can engage in intimate conversations arranged to make an appropriate and professional impression. Unsurprisingly, beginning performers/counsellors,

as a rehearsal or visualisation, spend an unusual amount of time arranging this setting so that it expresses something of their identity and is predictive of their forthcoming relationship. After so much energy has been invested in its preparation, the disappointment when a client fails to attend is palpable. A lot, too, is invested in what Goffman calls the counsellor's "personal front", described as the "expressive equipment" that the audience identifies as the performers themselves (McNamee, 2004, pp. 65–66). This he divides into "appearance", normally those things that denote status and current social activity, and "manner", those which indicate how the counsellor and the client might perform in their upcoming encounter. Needless-to-say, consistency between appearance and manner in these interaction rituals are essential, and new counsellors, lacking confidence in both, can over-play one in their haste to make the best possible impression on their clients. Clients too will also want to make a consistent impression and confirm that the counsellor will meet their needs.

Goffman suggests that, as the social front of any specialised routine, like counselling, is likely to take place in generic settings with participants who present similar manners and appearances, so the client as both participant/performer and observer/audience to the event can broadly generalise a good or bad experience of one as predictive of another. Thus, all performers and the service they provide might be seen in the same light. Similarly, performers/counsellors who have had consistently successful experiences with particular types of clients may extrapolate these to all clients whose appearances and manners match that type. In the same way, the Eurocentric configuration of the counselling setting and its definition may also give an unassailable impression that all cultures are comfortable facing each other in chairs across a coffee table. Consequently, beginning counsellors wedded to a particular personal front and setting lose sight of the client and their own creativity and uniqueness, and instead present counselling routines that they believe are consistent with an acceptable counsellor persona.

In contrast, Goffman's back region is more private, a place where the counsellor's performance is usually unobserved by clients and more relaxed. It is a place where counsellors may drop or adjust their personal fronts, make and rehearse new scripts, practice routines and gestures, take on other roles, and where they believe themselves to be more authentic. Thus, Goffman's counsellors may perform one way in front of clients but behave more casually

and less routinely beyond the professional expectations and gaze of their audience. However, whilst these distinctions may be acceptable for regular service relationships, it is suggested that as counsellors develop in confidence and competence, they will find ways to explain, explore, and minimise the differences in their behaviours across these two regions. Indeed, encouraged by their training to be transparent about their back-stage performances and incorporate them into the front, counsellors will explore discrepancies and begin to model symmetrical expressive communication and congruence to all their audiences.

It is also important to note that if counsellors focus too much on front performances and ignore their down-time in the back, there is a danger that the correct balance between work and play is lost. Similarly, there can be a danger for beginning counsellors if their educators and supervisors only prioritise the work that they are doing at the front without taking into account their routines in the back. In addition, Goffman's suggestion that front and back-stage relations are contingent upon different levels of intimacy might also explain why students find it so hard to strike a good balance in their work. Perhaps because professional services like counselling are recognised and popularly defined by the nature and outcomes of their delivery, participants' attentions are more easily drawn to its front region activities rather than to the back. However, drawing too heavy a line between front and back might suggests that the level of intimacy and understanding, normally reserved for the more private back-region encounters, is less available from counsellors who wish to engage their clients in any level of relational depth in the front. Counselling as a service, therefore, might consider the use of a hypothetical third region, a bridge or balance between front and back in which the actors are able to draw upon the benefits of both.

2. **Students as performers/counsellors**

Counsellors in their early training and development are typically overly self-conscious, excited, overwhelmed, and confused by their chosen profession. They also typically under-estimate how technical and skilful the role is to perform. Beginners, for example, with little practice, who ignore the impact of first-contact impression-making, or too rigidly follow the introductory routines handed down by their educators, may find it hard to successfully perform their part or routine, or to present a counsellor persona that they can be comfortable

with. Equally, when the trainee permits the social and psychological conditions of a session to remain unfulfilled or ill-defined, it becomes much easier for them to allow their professional boundaries to loosen and put their own needs before the client's. As Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003) suggest, adopting a "laissez-faire" client involvement style can be problematic, especially if the trainee lacks a fully developed and flexible counsellor persona (p. 17). Intensive supervision, further training, and personal counselling work can often counteract the student's reliance on this external locus of control and support balance between, and integration of, the persona and the self. Being clear about boundaries, rather than enforcing mutual self-protection or preventing "unofficial communication", deepens trust, safety, and relationship (Goffman, 1969, p.167).

In early counselling encounters students are self-conscious about being good enough and experience the very real sense of incongruence that comes with being an actor in a role. Highly sensitised to negative self-talk and the critical voices of educators, clients, and peers, they cannot help but assume "a self-image of someone engaged in the clumsy and embarrassing process of becoming" (Goffman, 1969, p. 139). Nevertheless, as training moves forward students become less focused on the self in the process, overcome stage-fright, and use reflexive practice to grow their abilities and invest more of their becoming selves in the role.

Being authentic in performance, while it requires honesty and trust in self and other, can also make performers/counsellors vulnerable and more defensive. Goffman notes, however, that in most social encounters participants separately decide their depth of engagement. However, while beginning counsellors and clients get to select the most appropriate ways of presenting themselves and can even use their powers to preserve themselves from full disclosure and protect themselves from intimacy, the performer/counsellor often directly influences and regulates the client's flow of experience through the use of moment-to-moment reflexivity, observations, and interventions. As authority figures, counsellors rebalance the power differential implied by the "definition of the situation" by encouraging their clients to actively assume the role of the fully functioning person and expert in their own lives. Similarly, by focussing on the client, counsellors can consider their feelings towards them and preserve the shared definition of the situation.

3. **Students' use of the definition of the situation in developing counselling relationships**

When individuals enter the presence of others, they naturally want to learn more about them in order "to bring into play information… already possessed" (Goffman, 1969, p.1). These personal details begin to define the situation, enabling both parties to know in advance what to expect of the other. In the context of counselling there are normally introductions and discussions concerning contracts and ground rules that influence counselling delivery and expectations. Goffman (1969) calls these "pre-established patterns of action that unfold during a performance" either in the front or back region of the setting, part or routine (p. 14). Initial judgements are also made from first impressions gleaned from the responses to these routines. These judgements are used to predict safety, behaviour, and potential outcomes. For example, in their defining of the situation, performers/counsellors and clients establish a context-specific reality that guides how they will act "to call forth a desired response" from the personas self-selected for this performance (p. 1). However, unlike in ordinary social interactions, as a rehearsal of practice, this is likely to include the additional element of educator-, supervisor-, and peer-performances too, both in the front and in the back.

To avoid role confusion and misunderstandings, it is important that the performer/counsellor does not make assumptions about their client's definition of the situation and checks frequently to see if they are both on the same page (Goffman, 1969, p. 14). When roles are indistinct and situations poorly defined, the interaction can lose integrity. All settings project a definition that explicitly and implicitly exerts a moral claim that the participants are of a "particular kind", which gives them the right to be treated and valued in the manner that their roles direct (p. 11). In counselling this definition should bring counsellor and client expectations into alignment, secure a safe working consensus, and enable the clear identification of client needs and goals, and the work to be done. In addition, just as Rogers's conditions are necessary and sufficient in a counselling session, so the definition supports clients to feel comfortable about entering this ritualised space and disclosing their authentic selves.

4. **Students' use of verbal and non-verbal expressive communication – giving good impressions versus expressing congruence**

Counselling sessions are not easy for beginning performers/counsellors to negotiate. Even though the encounter may be wholly defined, the rules clear, issues expressed, and the process observed and recorded, it takes time for them to adjust to a performer/counsellor role that initially seems to contradict the effective facilitation of Rogers's core conditions. For example, students may experience performance anxiety when they vacillate between making favourable impressions and expressing congruence. This dilemma is discussed in Goffman's (1969) distinction between two equally expressive modes of communication: controlled, intentional, and conscious forms of communication that can be controlling; and non-verbal expressions that individuals "give off", that they are unable to control (p. 3). When these modes of expression are communicated asymmetrically to the client the incongruence between the counsellor's professional persona performed at the front and their private self at the back becomes very clear. To offset this incongruence, and maintain greater symmetry of expression, for example, the performer/counsellor may filter all emotions or behaviours that could be received by the client as disapproving or discomforting. However, acknowledging this self-protective "feigning" provides a valuable opportunity to the self to challenge the professionalism of the persona. Experiencing "inopportune events" like these can create enough personal incongruence to sabotage performances, but long-term, they can prompt performer/counsellor self-appraisal and realignment (Goffman, 1969, p. 46).

5. **Managing self-deception and trust – challenges for the student counsellor**

Interestingly, Goffman (1969) suggests that people are better at discovering the dissembling behaviours and practices of others than they are of manipulating their own behaviours, which makes the "maintenance of expressive control" quite a challenge for trainees, who in session question their own cues, become distracted by misplaced phrases from their routines, surprising responses from their clients, subtle and spontaneous shifts in timing, or mutual misunderstandings (p. 45). Such counsellor-centric absorption unsettles counsellor performances and causes trainees to negatively misinterpret client responses to them. Ironically in these early stages of meeting, clients are similarly self-absorbed and do not immediately take in their counsellors' overt impression and information giving, unless it challenges the discomfiting inconsistency of their own asymmetrical communication.

Turning to relationships, Goffman provocatively asks what might prevent either party from mistrusting each other's persona and practicing deception. In counselling interactions performers/counsellors are taught to make themselves vulnerable to their clients, not to judge or deceive but to unconditionally accept the client's presentation of self and the stories that they bring. However, when a counsellor persona is threatened by clients who appear to intentionally misdirect the definition of the situation, the counsellor may deploy "defensive practices" (p. 12). In extremis, counsellors taking clients' self-deceits personally might, in their own defence, be tempted to blame, pathologise or inappropriately attach labels to the client when protective practices or "tact" may be positively employed to prevent and understand further disruptions. Goffman (1969) also notes that "matters which the audience leave alone because of their awe of the performer" are likely to be those that are most usefully explored (p. 61). Thus, in counselling encounters, defensive and protective behaviours are viewed as possible indicators of discomfort and are named and examined further. Performers/counsellors may also respond to these challenges through reviewing, clarifying, reality checking, and altering their stage demeanours and approaches.

6. **Managing reality – when student counsellors break role in performance**

Goffman (1969) maintains that, as moral standards ritually direct impression management in organised encounters, the personas of performers/counsellors, their educators and clients are, as merchants of morality, positively judged by the validity of their application of moral rules and appropriate performances (p. 249; see also, McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011, pp. 49–58). He calls these judgements "incidents" and suggests that they are experienced as disruptions in the flow of the performance. In counselling these "alliance ruptures" (Saffran et al., cited in Mearns & Cooper, 2018, p. 156) also present as opportunities for the counsellor and client to engage at a more authentic level. For example, when a performer/counsellor breaks character to make a personal and emotionally provocative interjection, which may be received by the client with embarrassment or confusion, or as an invitation to step beyond the definition of the scene. Either way, "the reality sponsored by the performers is threatened… forcing upon the audience an image of the man behind the mask" (Goffman, 1969, p.186). Thus, "the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps" (p. 49), or respectfully used to establish a gateway into the client's world.

Whatever actions performers/counsellors believe to be real will vary according to their definition of the situation, level of engagement, and culture of origin. Nevertheless, a degree of self-illusion in performance is inevitable. At the start of their training performers/counsellors are keen to obtain favourable valuations of self and can manipulate self and audience into judging them in particular ways. To be effectively self-deceptive the performance must be a believable representation of reality for both the performer/counsellor and the client/ audience. Thus, the more the student achieves validation the more able they are to discard anxieties that their performances are pretence, believe in the part, and become it.

7. **Negotiating role conflict – students traverse the road from performance to authenticity**

Goffman (1969) asserts that there are two ways that individuals negotiate the conflict they experience between their authentic self and the role they are to perform. They may either be sincere, fully convinced by the reality of their roles and performances, or "cynical" and self-consciously aware that they are not who they claim to be (p. 15). Counsellors in training may embrace both options but the latter is the most difficult to traverse.

Cynical about the authenticity of their performances, preoccupied with protecting the self, and needing to satisfy expectations of supervisors, peers, and clients, trainees experience performance anxiety, role confusion, and helplessness, and begin to identify more with their clients' roles than their own. Clients can also give performances that over-emphasise one aspect of their role over another and exploit routines or learned behaviours that are designed to arouse the counsellor's attention. Thus, over a period of time, the counsellor will experience the cycle from disbelief to belief, from cynicism to sincerity. The danger, as Goffman notes, is that the counsellor's self is likely to remain isolated from engagement with the client if cynicism remains. Wounded healers who enter the profession to give something back may find that their experiences give them insight but could also, paradoxically, prevent them from developing their sincerity.

Integration – Realising the counsellor-self through performance

As a service professional the counsellor persona is well-defined and has a front that trainees can adopt and customise. Goffman's self, however, is a unique entity. It is a performer, a socially managed impression, and a part-self only visible in encounters with others – the product of a scene rather than its cause (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008). The self as an actor allows the performer/counsellor, or its persona, to introduce itself to the audience in one role in the front but also to step into the back in another. Goffman's (1969) notion of selfhood implies that behind the persona is a person, the core of who we are. However, in his section on "Performances" in the *Presentation of Self*, he argues that one can be equally convinced of a sincere and dishonest performance as much as an honest one, and that reality is far too slippery a concept to fully understand. Thus, he notionally accepts the existence of a social self without needing to qualify it, suggesting that as appearance and reality are both socially constructed, they are both equally viable in the management of impressions.

> …if the front you present to audiences is what they know of you, and if you develop your sense of self through interactions with others, then is your self not an image realized in performance? Truth, in reality, is a fiction. (Berger & Luckman, 1971, p. 489)

Goffman's position inevitably raises the question as to whether the goal of achieving congruence between the social self, and the psychological self as performer and character are even possible. However, as counsellors attempt, as much as they can without disruption, to integrate their back stage social performances and personas into their front stage counselling, it becomes more of a realistic goal.

Thus, Goffman's dramaturgy suggests that performances can be viewed as neither real nor contrived but as necessary actions that we "fill in" as we go along to present and realise the self (Berger & Luckman, 1971, p. 65). Consequently, based upon Goffman's idea of social integrity and authenticity and Rogers's notion of actualisation, it is safe to assume that, regardless of what the persona is, in the moment of its performance it sincerely represents an aspect of the authentic self. This confirms Rogers's sensible assertion that counsellors may only accept and work with what clients present to them and that they may use their experiences of the self, either as a social entity or psychological manifestation, to assist clients to reflect, interpret, measure, and make changes in the light of their performances.

Afterword

If individuals are constrained by the limitations imposed by social interactions to present themselves in performances, then examining the development of the counsellor self through Goffman's dramaturgical lens is not a cynical enterprise. In its broad conception, viewing oneself as both a performer and as a character exposes the role and persona of the counsellor to valuable scrutiny and grows beginning counsellors' self-knowledge and awareness.

Employing Goffman's dramaturgy as a conceptual framework for interaction analysis, rather than a model of consciousness, it is the persona of the counsellor that initiates, and is instrumental in, engagement with the client and safely facilitates the ritualised performances of self – both the counsellor's and client's selves are mutually realised through action, observation, and shared engagement. For beginning counsellors to genuinely bring their authentic selves into the encounter and to simultaneously wear a professional service mask is both comforting and, paradoxically, counterfeit. However, by not allowing the self to become hostage to the persona, counsellors develop and learn as they reconcile the two. The persona, no less the self that it denotes, is the authority that permits the client to accept the counsellor and allow temporary access to their inner worlds. Developing through training "from the outside in"[5], the beginning counsellor recognises that the persona could be a therapeutic tool, an intervention, and an authentic representation of the self. In short, counsellors learn to use the persona less as protection for the self and more as its instrument.

Notes

1. This article was developed from a chapter originally written by the author and first published as: Bray, P. (2018). 'We all act better than we know how': A dramaturgical treatment of beginning counsellors' performances of self. In P. Bray and M. Rzepecka, (Eds.), Communication and conflict in multiple settings. (pp. 82–112). Brill/Rodopi. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004373679

2. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss recent developments and trends in person-centred "self theory", but the following are recommended: Mearns and Thorne's (2002) reflections on pluralism and integration, specific configurations and dynamics of self in relation to phenomenal experience, and on an evolving dialogical person-centred theory of self; also, Mearns and Thorne (2008) on the counsellor's use of the self, and particularly the sections regarding the changing self of the counsellor and the experience of relational depth – also the subject of Mearns and Cooper's (2015; 2018) book that invites the counsellor and client into a deep encounter where they may experience profound feelings of contact; Cooper et, al.'s (2013) person-centred handbook is also a rich source of material on developments in the field. You might also be interested in Tudor and Worrall (2006) and Tudor and Rodgers (2021).

3. It is not the intention of this article to be received as just another "White settler psychology that perpetuates the colonization of knowledge and the thinking of future generations" (Tudor & Rodgers, 2021, p. 93). This article has limited itself to the presentation of only those reflexive concepts of the self found in Western literature, rather than the interconnected or extended self, exemplified by Māori culture (Rua et al., 2017) and developed in Hermans's (1992; 2001) psychological concept of the dialogical self. For further discussion on Māori self, identity, and wellbeing please return to the comprehensive scholarship of Mason Durie; McLachlan et al. (2017); and NiaNia et al. (2016).

4. Over the last two decades Hermans (2001) has also argued for an extended self, that is, something greater than an essential core self that exists within the social and cultural, a unified self of multiple positions "among which dialogical relationships can develop" (p. 243).

5. Goffman, quoting Charles Horton Cooley's (1992) concept of "the looking glass self", in which he suggests individuals shape their concept of self according to their understanding of how others perceive them.

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