Intimate Encounters: Personal Reflections on Counselling Practice, Theory and Research

Maggie Robson
Intimacy

Film: ‘Equilibrium’

- Sought to avoid a 4th devastating world war
- Took a drug everyday to stop them feeling negative emotions but also prevented positive one
- Believed ‘the disease is emotion’
- Grammoton Clerics ‘seek out and eradicate true source of man’s inhumanity – feelings’
- A world without intimacy
Intimacy

- Rebels stimulated by music, poetry, art and the need for relationship – intimacy

....but I, being poor, have only my dreams; I have spread my dreams under your feet; Tread softly because you tread on my dreams (W.B. Yeats)
Intimacy

It seems to be universally accepted that counselling almost always encourages intimate encounters between counsellors and clients but what do we mean by intimacy and is it always a positive thing?
Intimacy

Four types of intimacy:
- cognitive or intellectual intimacy,
- experiential intimacy (doing things together),
- emotional intimacy
- sexual intimacy

(Australian Institute for Professional Counsellors web site)

Emotional intimacy seems to be the type that is recognised within a counselling relationship and is described as being when feelings are shared and empathic understanding strived for. This suggests a reciprocity in the intimate encounter that may not be present.
Intimacy

Brady et al. (1995) suggest that although therapeutic relationships are intimate, that intimacy is one way - Therapist has intimate knowledge of the client but the client does not have the same intimacy with the therapist.

Interestingly, they also note that this may be a reason that some therapists choose to enter the profession – in order to establish an intimacy that doesn’t require reciprocity.
Intimacy

Intimacy from a perspective which emphasises the self: Lerner's (1990) definition of an intimate relationship:

'An intimate relationship is one in which neither party silences, sacrifices, or betrays the self and each party expresses strength and vulnerability, weakness and competence in a balanced way' (p. 3).

This seems to perhaps describe an intimacy that we may want to strive towards but that many of us may not have achieved and one which may not be appropriate to counselling – one way???
Is it always Positive?

Means (1990) argues that: ‘such caring, such willingness simply to be fully in each other’s presence, always led to creative movement in the end.’

Russell (1999) disagrees and believes intimacy can be very threatening to some clients. Intimate counselling relationships are limited by professional boundaries, so they can be likened to prostitution – paying for an hour’s intimacy a week. Also, are we limited in the types of intimacy we offer and should we be?
Intimacy is only possible after an individual has become autonomous to some degree. Importance for individuals to become acquainted with themselves, know their feelings, affirm their needs and have the ability to communicate them in a responsible way.

This development of autonomy and self knowledge is at the heart of much counsellor training.
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Practice

Thorne (1991) suggests intimacy is the 2nd phase in the counselling relationship where ‘the client is able to reveal some of the deepest levels of his experiencing’ (page 42) coming after trust and before mutuality.
Relational Depth and Intimacy

To be able to be an intimate companion requires us as practitioners to know and understand ourselves.

Van Deurzen-Smith (1996) :
‘I am only as competent with my clients as I have been with myself. I am the measure of my capacity for passion and I can only ally myself with the suffering and yearning of my clients to the extent that I have gone through the fire of such challenges myself’ (page 16)
Relational Depth and Intimacy

Cooper (2005) defines relational depth as: ‘...a feeling of profound contact and engagement with another, in which the therapists experienced high levels of empathy, acceptance and transparency towards their clients, and experienced their clients as acknowledging their empathy and acceptance in a genuine way’
Relational Depth and Intimacy

One of his participants describes it thus:
‘During the session what he was telling me was how much I mattered to him—not just the counselling mattered to him, but me…. There was a real vitality in that and I knew the vitality of it. I could tell in the way he was saying it…. [T]here was something of a knowing who we were to each other in that moment that was really, really important, and, um, there was something about I— what I felt was complete trust of myself and him as well as in that moment.’
Case Examples: Intimate Encounters

V was my client on and off over a period of fifteen years. He would appear for therapy, engage for a while and then move to another part of the country in order to take up a job. Months, sometimes years, later he would re-appear and engage in more therapy. He never maintained contact in between these sessions but it never felt that we had come to the end of our relationship. One morning I had a telephone call from a complete stranger who V had told of our relationship, telling me he was dead. He had been found in mysterious circumstances and it was never clear if he killed himself or allowed himself to die. I believe he allowed himself to die.
Case Examples: Intimate Encounters

In examining who I was in the relationship and who he was, I can begin to make some meaning of it.
V had been terribly wounded, and towards the end, I feel mortally wounded, by sexual abuse experienced as a boy. He was a man who had had his childhood and adolescence ripped away from him by rape. I experienced him as a wounded, hurt and frightened child in a man’s body, desperate for wholeness and safety. Within the relationship I experienced myself as one of the two people in the word who he trusted completely. He was safe to be that lost adolescent. He could engage in guided imagery that allowed him to build camps in the wood and survive in the wild. He could ask questions about relationships and fully experience his loss.
Case Examples: Intimate Encounters

Sometimes I felt he could recapture his lost youth and grow to be the whole and complete young man that he desperately wanted to be but latterly I believed that he had to hang onto his wounds in order to punish his violator. I was one of the two people he could bear to care for him – I was his safe place. When he died I felt an overwhelming sadness mixed with a kind of relief. He was at peace and his torments were laid to rest. At the same time he left a gap in my life. I had huge compassion, respect and affection for him. I loved him as a brave human spirit who struggled to make sense of his hurt and heal himself. (Robson, 2008b)
Case Example: Intimate Play Therapy Encounters

Leigh was referred for therapy by his mother after his elder sister, who I will call Sam, died suddenly. Although Sam had a heart condition and had recently been in hospital, she was expected to recover.

Session 2

The major theme of this session seemed to be confronting nightmares. Leigh decided immediately to play on the Nintendo with the game Zelda. He said he liked Zelda because the hero can grow up in it. Again I wondered if this was connected to Sam not being able to grow up any more. He played and I commented on what was happening and also asked questions as to what was going on. The hero (Leigh, who took the name Link) had 3 hearts to start off with and also got his heart repaired. This is how the game is scored but again I felt there may be a connection with the choice of this game and Sam dying of a heart condition.
Case Example: Intimate Play Therapy

Encounters

We were both on edge when he crossed the plank bridge and relieved when he made it. He ended up collecting the sword and the shield and being allowed into the tree. ‘Here’, he said, ‘you have to confront your own nightmares and do battle with them’. He was told (by the game) to climb up a wall but there was a giant spider so he gave up and said he couldn’t go that way. He was then told to go through a door but it was guarded by a giant squirrel type thing who threw nuts at him which exploded. He tried to overcome this by attacking it and tried to shield himself but was overcome and died. He immediately packed up (we were nearly out of time) and said he was going to ask his cousin for some ‘cheats’. He seemed very frightened and I wondered if there was a connection here to his own troubled sleep. (Robson 2008a)
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Training

Training in Humanistic Counselling involves becoming intimate with our-selves in order to be able to offer an intimate relationship to our clients, characterised in person centred counselling by the offering of the core conditions of Empathy, Congruence and Unconditional Positive Regard. We need to know ourselves intimately and therefore increase our self awareness and offer to ourselves the core conditions. Counsellor training offers opportunities to do this.
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Training

Person-centred counselling training includes learning and development in certain areas like personal development (PD groups, community meetings, individual tutorials, keeping diaries, personal therapy, experiential and self-awareness work), academic and theoretical work, supervised counselling placement and training in counselling skills (Mearns, 1997). Rowen (1999) suggests it allows us to cross the ‘great gap’ - from relying on others for knowledge of who we are to relying on self.
Rogers (Joan) (2004) describes her initial reaction to PD (sensitivity) groups:

‘For they did feel strange to me initially, especially when I was earnestly hunting for skills and knowledge. Six or seven people sit in a room, and wait for someone to start talking. Wow! ‘What is this about?’ some of us wanted to know’.

After her initial confusion and trepidation, she saw the value:

‘I needed the felt experience of exposing feelings and vulnerabilities, receiving and understanding these in others, to know a little of where my clients are. I am profoundly grateful to the sensitivity group for offering me that.’
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Training

Joan Rogers was able, with hindsight, to see the value of Personal development groups but when you are in them they can be risky places:

‘Someone in the group says, ‘‘I can hear in your voice that you are very upset’’. This feels strange and I am aware of having shown some vulnerability in the group, which I am aware, is really risky for me, as I prefer to stay hidden. Maybe this is what the group is enabling us to do, a place to risk being vulnerable.’ (A)

‘The least safe moment was when I was confronting one person in the group about my experiencing of them. I felt very uncertain – I wanted to be real but also constructive. When I started, I wanted to challenge a particular statement, but I realised halfway through I was really challenging aspects of the person’s way of being. I felt unsafe when my feelings of frustration with the person started to feel more intense than I thought they were. I felt unsafe because I was not sure I could trust me.’ (B)

(Robson & Robson, 2008)
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Training

Students on a Masters Course in Kenya and Durham were asked:
- To what extent, if any, did you share different aspects of yourself in the PD group that you would not normally disclose?

**Group 1** was a group in Kenya that was drawing to the end of their two year programme. 2 PD groups of 12, 2 facilitators with them from start of 2 year programme, 2 tutors joined PD from Durham during blocks.

**Group 2** was a group of FT students in Durham given to them 2/3rds of the way through their programme. 3 PD groups of 10, 3 facilitators from the start of course.

Mixed Experience!
I shared a lot about my family - something I cannot do outside my PD group even in the big group.

At an average extent. I was open to some personal issues (and I felt relieved and helped after sharing) but I also withheld some nasty experiences. The good thing was that I got to choose what to say and what not to say.

Very deep. I was scared at how I trusted everyone in the group. Walked naked and felt comfortable.

I shared so much of myself, my vulnerable self and my deep pain of my own married life experiences and relationships that hurt. Which otherwise I would not have.

To an extent that still amazes me - greatly.

I think I shared as much as I felt safe. But scared about my upbringing and its effect on me. My parental and marital relationships - I cannot share this in any other forum.

If I was to put in a percentage, I would say eighty percent.
Intimate Encounters in Counselling
Training: Kenya

- a large- unbelievable extents. After I did I almost always wondered what hit me.
- To a very large extent (about 60)
- To a very great extent, I shared some aspects that I couldn’t even share with other parts of myself let alone other people in other situations.
- I did this occasionally because I felt safe and valued.
- I shared a lot of very deep memories which included my family.
- To a great extent, most of what I shared I would not normally share with other friends or even relatives.
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Training: Kenya

- I shared, very deeply, things I would find difficult outside the PD.
- I shared my lonely life as a single parent and my relationship with my brothers who are always asking for help.
- I took a risk to deal with some very painful experiences in my life. I owe that to the fact that I was safe and I am happy that I did.
- I shared what I felt I could have inhibited about my mother's death.
- *I have been greatly surprised by how much of myself I have been able to share within the safety of the group. I have also allowed my emotions to get out of hiding, painful as they were.*
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Training: Durham

- **Group 2: Durham**
- I am generally very open and I did not disclose any aspects of myself, positive or negative. At least as much as I am aware of!
- Did not share information initially but have started to disclose information (7 months in)
- I did not disclose many aspects of myself. Most of my development occurred by listening to others and processing material by myself.
- Have shared experiences of lost bereavement that I normally keep to myself. Still keep personal relationships private.
- Rarely. Safety and therefore risk-taking have not been promoted within the group dynamic.
- I have been able to share highly personal material, and especially within the PD, I have discovered even closer friendships which have enabled me to be even more open with them. I have benefited from being able to show my emotions and therefore have come to terms with some of the pain.
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Training: Durham

- Not very much.
- I share aspects of myself, especially if I need help and support. However, I feel excepted and not shy and embarrassed. I wouldn’t do it in front of people who I wouldn’t trust and feel comfortable with.
- I did not feel safe enough to do so. I did not see it as a counselling setting. I found myself reluctant to reveal very much within the PD group.
- I just disclose 60%, but I felt that is too much. I often feel painful after disclosure. But I don’t know whether they can understand me and be willing to help me. Finally, I know I can cope with it by myself.
- I don’t think I have shared enough aspects of myself, though I would want to, but I don’t feel ready yet.
- I don’t think this is to do with my nature. I am more inclined to share deep material in a 1 to 1 situation. I might if I felt it could help in some way!
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Training

Students asked about their experiences of counselling each other as part of the training:

‘... One of them I had gone into knowing I had wanted to focus and sort something out, and that was the fourth category of peer counselling. The other one was very spontaneous, I think that is why it had such a powerful impact. I was quite unprepared for what came up. It was very very powerful. It was a very positive powerful experience as well. Very empowering for me as a person to be part of it. It really sticks in your mind as wow .. blimey. It was incredibly pleasant. It was more the surprise element of it which at the time I was feeling quite vulnerable anyway and it is the at the time I needed a level of confidence boosting myself and it really happened. I came to an awareness about myself. I walked out of there feeling like a million dollars.'
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Training

‘That was the time, I had forgotten about that, that I had greatest self development as a client. It was the continuity somehow, because that year was the year when I really wanted to look at myself and I can remember as a client the sessions were very much like dealing with what were coming up during that year, I suppose that was the point which I had chosen to really sort myself out and recognised the counselling was a forum for me as a client was very helpful and yet the girl I was working with, she was no more qualified than I am. We were on a counselling skills course and we worked together all year.’

(Robson & Robson, 2011)
Magic in Action

I have witnessed people being able to acknowledge and regret behaving violently towards another, people who arrived in the group with a huge wall surrounding them, gradually let it go. I have witnessed people who have lived a lifetime feeling dirty and despoiled by abuse celebrate their own beauty and potency. I have witnessed people grieve openly and desperately for losses, losses of themselves, losses of loved ones, find peace within themselves.
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Research

- Seems strange to think of intimate encounters in research!
- Power of qualitative research
- Rich, deep description
- Meaning making
- Intimate Encounters as Supervisor & Researcher
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Research
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Research: Experience of writing Dissertation

Students asked to email me accounts of the process of writing dissertation.

6 students out of a possible 25 responded. These accounts ranged in length from half a page (N:1), one page (N:4) and three and a half pages (including the reflective chapter from the dissertation) (N:1).

I then divided each account into units of sentences i.e. each sentence became a unit. I read each account and allocated a category to each unit and then collected all sentences from these categories together. I then looked at the categories that had been generated and realised that some of them overlapped and so collapse some categories together to produce themes. This resulted in the generation of nine major themes with Theme 7 being divided into 6 sub themes
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Research

Table 1: Major Themes:

1. Changes in and Insights into Self
2. Own emotions through the process of doing the dissertation
3. Therapeutic Power of Dissertation
4. Recognising similarities between own stories and participants
5. Professional Learning from the process
6. Comments on Method/Topic Chosen
7. Importance of Support/ Safety
   Sub themes: a) Supervision b) Friends c) Family d) Other students e) Work Colleagues
f) Creating own safety
8. Interest in this research
9. Challenging own values
Major Theme: Changes in and Insights into Self Examples from Participants Accounts

Rose: ‘It helped me to clarify lots of blurriness with regards to the person I have become and where I’d like to be in the future. One of the most profound realisations came with the new found awareness of how I dealt with my experience as a child.’

Lilly: ‘I really felt that I was putting my head above the parapet in expressing my opinions. Circa twenty years ago (aged 40) I engaged in a great deal of assertiveness skills training in order to increase my confidence – evening classes, self-help books etc. Norman Vincent Peale’s “The Power of Positive Thinking” became my Bible.” My constant mantras were “My needs are just as important as those of others;” and “My opinions are just as good as those of others. I had to condition myself to believe this. It was only with the Diploma course that I became prepared to voice my opinions in public, and even then would wait for others to give theirs first. After completing the Dissertation, with the desired result, particularly as it was far better than I dared hope for, I finally, genuinely, believe that my opinions are just as good as others. With that has come a feeling of having grown up over the past year…I now sense that I am gaining more respect from the people who know of my achievement, which is a really good feeling, and has a further knock-on effect on my confidence. Of course, it could be that I am expecting that respect now. As far as my self-awareness is concerned, the process confirmed what I already knew about myself. Most significantly, just how painstakingly thorough I am, and how I always give myself a lot to do…I believe that for once, my thoroughness really paid off, and I now have a feeling that there is nothing that I couldn’t do if I really wanted to.’
Major Theme: Changes in and Insights into Self
Examples from Participants Accounts

Chrysanthemum: ‘Such feelings have taken me by surprise, although this in itself is surprising because there is a familiarity about them. I discover that the war on perfectionism I have waged for so long - and thought won - rages on after all and destructive messages of anything less than perfect being rubbish have resurfaced with a shout.’

Lilac: ‘After finishing my research, death become a monster, less frightening and easier to fight with because I had already talked about it so much through this process. My favourite Cretan author would say: “Only if you look your biggest fear in the eyes, then your fear will feel scared and it will run away”. Actually my fear didn’t run completely away, but it became something recognisable, something I could touch and feel, something I know better; and the best way to fight enemies, I know from my childhood, is to know them better. Regarding my great difficulty of counselling people with suicide ideation because of my moral values; the dissertation again became a great support… One thing I learnt for sure out of this effort; I learnt to accept suicide as somebody’s decision, no matter how much against I am towards it. And this helped me to deal better with my clients, my fears and eventually with my own life.'
Major Theme: Changes in and Insights into Self - Examples from Participants Accounts

Daffodil: ‘Something about me is that I want to know the end before I start anything. So it’s about identifying any obstacles and being prepared for these. It’s about keeping safe in a situation I don’t know. Because the dissertation is about being reflexive and doing this by bracketing of my own thoughts, experiences etc, not reading the literature, so not informing myself of what has already been said, I really struggled with the battle in me to have the solution, the answer to the question before I had put pen to paper…So as a result the way out of this is to break the rules. To be dishonest and not tell or own up to what I had done. This was a continuing struggle to remain honest…Maybe also around this was the desire to succeed and to do anything rather than be a failure. I learnt that if I write down everything, revealing all that happened then this was OK. I realise that I have cheated in my life to get out of a situation, to solve a problem etc. Anything goes when I’m in this situation. I could subtly argue that it was ok to cheat. This has been a great piece of learning and understanding especially as I would not have gone there to examine this (keeping it out of my range of awareness) or even denying that it was even cheating. Everybody cheats a little bit so its OK are the little voices. I also was not prepared to analyse, discuss, conclude, in any personal depth for fear that my opinions would be wrong. It was a light touch approach in my dissertation. I had strong feelings about the subject but was not prepared to say. It was a cautious approach. I could not be wrong, could not fail, so it was a very negative and did not push my boundaries, I did not challenge myself. So if I am to grow as a person I need to be as honest as I can be. When I’m being challenged, not to shrink away but to struggle against this protection of myself and see it as an opportunity to reveal more of myself that is so wonderful!!!!’
Major Theme: Changes in and Insights into Self-Examples from Participants Accounts

Tulip: ‘Originally I had decided against my chosen subject as I knew that I could not allow my dissertation be in the library at University for everyone to read. I changed my mind when I heard that you could limit it so that only three people could read it. I asked my daughters for their permission which they gladly gave. An aspect of my dissertation was the effect of secrecy. By the end of it I realised that not permitting anyone to read it went against all I felt and had learnt about secrecy. In many respects it didn't seem right. Yet I knew I must keep to what I had originally told my daughters. This was difficult at the time. Having taken a few steps in time away from the experience I am continually surprising myself. I hear myself saying 'Did I really say that?' What I mean is that somehow those thoughts that were always an internal dialogue seem somehow to have been connected to my voice now so that I say things without thinking and that seems good and right.’
Intimate Encounters in Counselling Research

As a researcher:

- Privileged, honoured, humbled to be allowed insights into participants experience
- Collective Biography
Conclusions

What a fortunate person to be allowed to witness the ability of human beings to heal themselves given the right conditions and celebrate the courage and great humanity demonstrated by students, clients and research participants.

What a journey!
When you start on your journey to Ithaca, then pray that the road is long, full of adventure, full of knowledge. Do not fear the Lestrygonians and the Cyclopes and the angry Poseidon. You will never meet such as these on your path, if your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine emotion touches your body and your spirit. You will never meet the Lestrygonians, the Cyclopes and the fierce Poseidon, if you do not carry them within your soul, if your soul does not raise them up before you.
Journey to Ithaca

Then pray that the road is long.
That the summer mornings are many,
that you will enter ports seen for the first time
with such pleasure, with such joy!
Stop at Phoenician markets,
and purchase fine merchandise,
mother-of-pearl and corals, amber and ebony,
and pleasurable perfumes of all kinds,
buy as many pleasurable perfumes as you can;
visit hosts of Egyptian cities,
to learn and learn from those who have knowledge.
Journey to Ithaca

Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.
to arrive there is your ultimate goal.
But do not hurry the voyage at all.
It is better to let it last for long years;
and even to anchor at the isle when you are old,
rich with all that you have gained on the way,
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.
Without her you would never have taken the road.
But she has nothing more to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.
With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience,
you must surely have understood by then what Ithaca means.
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