Stepping out of the Mould? – A Qualitative Inquiry into the Development of Counsellor Identity of Masters in Counselling Students

By

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A dissertation submitted to

The Department of Psychology

within the Faculty of Education

University of Malta

In Partial Fulfilment

of the Requirements for the Masters in Counselling

May 2012
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DECLARATION

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Course:  Masters in Counselling

I hereby declare that I am the legitimate author of this Thesis and that it is my original work.

No portion of this work has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or institution of learning.

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Signature of Student        Name of Student

7th May, 2012
Abstract

This qualitative study delved into the narrative of how the first cohort of locally trained Masters in counselling students are acquiring their professional identity in the Maltese context. A purposeful sample of six fourth year post-practicum students was divided into three categories based on previous academic and work experience prior to entering the training programme. Participants narrated their counselling journey both visually and verbally. The data was analysed through a creative use of narrative methodology to address the research questions. Participants agree that the experience of becoming a counsellor is a long and arduous one and feel that the collective group identity somewhat facilitated this process. Findings indicate that all six participants have experienced a change in their core and therapeutic selves and are at different points of their professional formation and of their lifelong journey of acquiring a unique counselling professional identity. Previous knowledge and practice were seen to be an asset and experience is an important component in the cumulative process towards expertise in the field. Such findings highlight the element of uniqueness in this process and equip counsellor educators with renewed awareness towards safeguarding and ensuring individuality in the formation of counselling trainees.

Keywords: counsellor professional identity; counselling collective identity; counsellor training.
Acknowledgments

Trying to find words to thank all those involved in this long journey is indeed difficult.

My first thank you goes to Dr Dione Mifsud, the co-ordinator of the course, a virtuous counsellor without whose vision, hard work and support none of this would have been possible. I truly appreciate and admire your perseverance and your disinterested professional support to each and every Masters student.

Another heartfelt thank you belongs to my dissertation supervisor, Anne Stokes, who has been an outstanding mentor. Your encouragement and invaluable suggestions have contributed to this work in no mean way. I thank you most of all for encouraging creative expression and teasing out my researcher identity.

My colleagues in the Masters course deserve my profound gratitude, some more than others for being there when times were tough. No one understands this experience like those who have travelled it with me. Your genuine friendship, honest feedback and words of encouragement are deeply appreciated. A special thank you goes to the research participants, six colleagues I have grown to know in more depth through the research project. I thank you for finding time to participate in the research at the same time that you were conducting your own. I am truly grateful.

Last but definitely not least I thank my family for their patience, their consistent support and their encouragement throughout this process. I thank you dear Mario for believing in me and for walking by my side, urging me on throughout this process. I also thank you Matthew and Andrew, my dearest sons for your words of encouragement when I felt tired and disheartened. You have become two fine young gentlemen. Your father and I are proud of you both.
Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my dear departed mother who would have never understood the relevance of spending so many hours writing and researching this piece of work. I miss you mum.
### List of Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACA</td>
<td>American Counselling Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>BACP</td>
<td>British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>CACREP</td>
<td>Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs.</td>
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<td>CPI</td>
<td>Counsellor Professional Identity</td>
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<td>IAC</td>
<td>International Association for Counselling</td>
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<td>MACP</td>
<td>Malta Association for the Counselling Profession</td>
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<tr>
<td>MQRIC</td>
<td>Malta Qualification Recognition Information Centre.</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>UoM</td>
<td>University of Malta</td>
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<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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It needs to be noted that the word “counsellor” has been written throughout this dissertation in the English version. There are some exceptions when referring specifically to counselling associations in America.
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Chapter 1: Acquisition of a Professional Counselling Identity

Hands holding a growing plant

The plant is associated with me. In the beginning of the course I was a twig, I was full of anxiety. Now that I’ve turned into a green plant I feel much stronger and well equipped for different kinds of weather.

The hands are associated with my supervisor who holds me and gives me a feeling of containment as well as encourages me to move on. The sun signifies the awareness, enlightenment and empowerment brought about by the counselling process.

Self-analysis of visual text: Participant five
Counselling in Malta is a profession in formation. The identity of the Counsellor is somewhat diffused with counsellors receiving their formation in different training programmes and by different kindred professionals. The cohort of Masters in counselling students in this study is the first group of twenty seven locally formed counsellors at the University of Malta (UoM). Previously, Maltese counsellors reading a Masters degree acquired their training and accreditation abroad, mostly in the United Kingdom. The (UoM) provided opportunities for post-grad diplomas for teachers; the first Diploma in Educational Guidance and Counselling was offered by the University of Malta in 1985 (De Giovanni, 1987).

This study intends to understand how these locally trained students are acquiring their professional identity, what difficulties they encounter and what dilemmas they go through in their professional formation, and how they are inserting themselves in the Maltese scenario.

Every chapter is presented by a visual text that depicts a self-defined snapshot of the participants’ acquisition of a counselling identity at the time of research enquiry. The rationale for this decision will be amplified in the methodology section.

This chapter is introduced by the visual text of Participant six, the participant who commenced the course with the least experience in the field. In this representation she experiences herself as an arid twig flourishing into a growing plant, slowly becoming stronger as she feeds herself from the sun (her supervisor) and from the earth beneath her (the Masters in the counselling course). The earth and the plant are held by a pair of hands (the supervisor) which in her case signifies the importance of the figure of the supervisor or educator in the process of becoming a counsellor. I chose this image because it portrays, in my opinion the novice counsellor very well.
Rationale of Study

As a participant researcher, I have myself experienced a change on a personal and professional level whilst studying for my Masters in counselling. This journey of becoming a counsellor has helped me to move away from my previous employment, wherein I had established a child and family support service for under-fives and their families in Malta. As part of my journey of transformation I immersed myself full time in the counselling profession in which I have worked across the whole spectrum of educational settings.

Along the course of study I experienced tensions and internal conflicts as I let go of my dream of becoming a psychologist or a family therapist, two other professions I could have pursued given my educational background and experience, and concentrated on acquiring the identity of a counsellor. I also think that through therapy I have got more in touch with my core self and have sharpened and fine-tuned my “personhood” (Satir, 1975) as the main therapeutic tool within the counselling process (Satir, 1975, 2001). Moreover, supervision has created a “sacred space” (Mollon, 1997) wherein I have grown in confidence as a counsellor and wherein I am learning to reflect in greater depth, learning in the process how to put together pieces of the big jigsaw puzzle that draw connections between my clients and their experiences.

According to Acker (1981), “Many of us study aspects of our autobiographies partially disguised as a ‘detached’ choice of an interesting problem” (p. 96). Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2001) note that as researchers we should understand why we are involved in a particular research, because the reason colours our definition and perception of our investigation and influences the output.

I am quite conscious that this research is motivated by my own experiences of this journey, by the experiences that I saw my colleagues undergo in the years we spent together,
by my passion to see the profession accredited as it deserves, and by my aspirations to be of service in the field of counsellor training and supervision in years to come.

Research objectives

It intrigues me to understand step by step the process of our Masters in counselling journey. What helped and what hindered the process? How could the process be improved? Does the training process lead to change and professional acquisition and, if so, what change and how is it manifested in our Maltese cultural context? Is every process unique or do we step out of a mould once we reach the end of our training programme? Since it is very unlikely that we do step out of a mould, does the course cater for individual development?

As prospective counsellors we entered training with different academic backgrounds and a different level of experience in the field. I am interested to understand whether this initial “advantage” would be levelled out during the course or otherwise.

Purpose of study

1. To investigate how three different categories of fourth year Masters in counselling students are working their way from the novice stage to the acquisition of counsellor identity.

2. To investigate whether the current Masters in Counselling course leads to the acquisition of a profession identity in the Maltese cultural context.

3. To give the students interviewed the opportunity to reflect about the acquisition of their professional identity. In narrative terms a story once told is transformed. It would be interesting to know how or whether this research has impacted on these fellow students and how or whether it has helped them in any way.
Defining professional identity

Before attempting to examine or explore the acquisition of a counselling professional identity it is necessary to define and understand the meaning of the word “profession”. The first recorded use of the terminology with reference to occupation goes back to the first half of the sixteenth century, in 1541 (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). The term was derived from Latin *professio* ‘public declaration’, with some of the first jobs declared publicly, creating precedents for a set of criteria which determine such professional recognition by society and former professionals working in the field.

Another meaning attributed to the term profession is derived from the field of religious studies. The term was a religious one and referred to ‘a proclamation of faith’. One was deemed to be a formidable ‘professor’ if one demonstrated a devotion that was flawless and above reproach. According to this tradition, the expression attained a secular connotation in the latter part of the seventeenth century, and by 1675 the term professional implied someone who has claims (to become a professional) due to qualifications. According to (McKeen Cattell, 1904), the first professions claiming a professional status due to qualifications were the medical and the legal profession.

Professional identity.

Authors contributing to the literature about counselling professional identity postulate that a ‘counselling identity’ depends on acquisition of a single, concrete and distinct identity (Ritchie, 1994; Smith, 2001; Caley & Hawley, 2008).

According to Douglas (2010), professional identity is a crucial precursor to the professionalising process. Quite some time ago Hughes (1951) claimed that occupational names are noteworthy because they represent how we perceive ourselves as workers within
the profession. He maintained that the term ‘profession’ is a symbol for a desired conception or one’s work, and hence one’s self. I would also argue that occupational names also define how we want others to perceive us. Moreover, it is also a recognition of credibility and competence which can be measured through a particular way of behaviour and professional being.

In an attempt to scientifically measure Counsellor Professional Identity (CPI) for her doctorate programme, Emerson (2010) created an instrument that can be used to measure the professional identity of counsellor across specialties and throughout the career span. This instrument measured six components including the knowledge and understanding of: a) the professional history, b) counselling philosophy, c) the roles and functions of counsellors, d) professional ethics, e) professional pride, and f) professional engagement. Although it was concluded that the instrument was useful, it was also concluded that a CPI contains complex components which vary across individuals and which might be too elusive to be measured in total through a scientific tool. This doctorate dissertation together with that of Puglia (2008) confirmed counselling as a profession with its own distinct philosophy based on a wellness model, and confirmed that counsellors have a distinctive ‘professional’ behaviour and way of being; behaviour emerging as a crucial factor because self-conception and self-perception are fundamental in the formation of a professional identity.

Counselling in Malta

The Malta Association for the Counselling Profession (MACP, 2011) Code of Ethics defines counsellors as: “A professional person who has academic qualifications recognised by the University of Malta or the Malta Qualification Recognition Information Centre (MQRIC)” (p. 2). It also defines persons who cannot call themselves counsellors: “Persons who studied helping skills in counselling as part of their training in other professions cannot
be called counsellors or offer counselling services.” This declaration is merely a recommendation and as yet does not hold any legal weight.

Notwithstanding the fact that the counselling profession is not yet warranted in Malta, the definition of counsellor and its counter definition according to MACP marks a particular moment in time in the establishment of the professional identity of Maltese counsellors. The association aims to institute ground for the establishment of the counselling profession in Malta and is insisting on the warrant for counsellors to confirm their professional status in a therapeutic community where the counsellor is usually given the connotation of a lesser qualified person by other established and warranted professions.

Professional accreditation bodies in the United Kingdom and the United States of America (BACP 2010; CACREP, 2001) also place a strong emphasis on stringent qualification requirements to grant a professional status. At present there are three cohorts of Masters in counselling students training at the University of Malta. The first group of twenty seven part-time students of which I form part is in the research phase, and at the time I started my research project was at the last semester of the fourth year of study. This group has already seen students specialising in Health Counselling, Community Counselling or Counselling Children and Adolescents in their third year. This is the group that I will be researching about.

There are another two groups of circa thirty one trainees mid-way through the course. Indeed, it is an exciting time for the evolution of counselling in the Maltese islands, which seems to be made even more exciting by the fact that the co-ordinator of these three courses has been nominated as President Elect of the International Association of Counsellors and will take up appointment as President in the next few months, establishing the Maltese imprint on local and foreign counselling communities.
Implications of the Study

It is expected that the study will document the process of a counsellor identity formation of the first cohort of Masters in counselling students at the University of Malta, thus contributing to the validation of the course and establishing the course as an effective preparation programme for the professional formation of counsellors on the island. Moreover, in line with the aforementioned stringent international guidelines on the warranting of counsellors (BACP, 2010; CACREP 2009), this research will be a supporting document towards the cause of the long awaited warranting of the profession.

Suggestions and recommendations for improvement of future courses will be an additional scope of this research.

Study Overview

The aim of this first chapter has been to introduce the research topic. Chapter two delves deeper into the theoretical aspect by examining prior literature in the area of professional counsellor formation. Chapter three describes the choice of methodology and its application in this research project, whereas Chapter four will be dedicated to the narratives of two participants, whilst the discussion of the results will ensue in Chapter five. Finally, Chapter six provides a summary of research findings, draws up recommendations, and provides a final conclusion to this study.
Chapter 1: Acquisition of a Professional Counselling Identity

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Chapter 4: Stanza analysis of two participants

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Chapter 6: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions

Chapter 1: Figure 1.1: Dissertation Overview
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Clover, Balloons and the Owl

Clover – fresh; growing yet green

Balloons - abundance/diversity; mixture of knowledge

Learned, more knowledgeable – yet I will never be wise enough

Self-analysis of visual text – Participant five.
This chapter will explore the formation of collective and personal counselling identities within a cultural context and tries to establish whether and how these identities are connected.

I chose the visual text of Participant five to illustrate the chapter precisely because it depicts an identity in the process of formation. The three elements, the owl (wisdom and knowledge), the balloon (playful creativity; diversity) and the clover growing in the sunlight are distinct and yet form part of the emerging counsellor identity of participant five.

**Counselling: A new profession**

Professional identity has been overall defined as “the possession of a core set of values, beliefs and assumptions about the unique characteristics of one’s selected profession that differentiates it from other professions” (Weinrach, Thomas & Chan, 2001, p. 168).

Lanman (2011) says that professional identity remains a central issue within the counselling profession’s evolutionary process since, in comparison to other more established professions working in the social field, counselling is a new profession. Granello and Young (2011) are in agreement and state that counselling as we know it now is said to be a young profession.

Other authors have attempted to trace counselling to its roots in their attempts to define the profession. Glassoff (2008) traces an evolution of the discipline across the history of mankind when counselling was originally associated with advice giving and was situated within the realm of wisdom and the wise. In this description of counselling every tribe and every society chose its advisors, people endowed with the skill to understand, reflect, and give counsel. In local contemporary literature Mifsud (2008) also weaves a connection
between the oracle chamber in the old megalithic temples on the island and the counselling profession, establishing counselling in its early forms in the pre-historic era.

In an endeavour to set a demarcation line, Stripling (1983) makes a distinction between innate wisdom and professional counselling, confirming that the idea of a “professionally trained counsellor is relatively new” (p. 206). Similarly, Glassoff (2008) creates a difference between the roots of counselling seated in wisdom and counselling as a profession evolving in response to the demands made by the industrialization and urbanization of the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Granello and Young (2011), adopt a systemic perspective of the evolution of counselling and insist that the identity of the profession has been shaped by the interplay of five major professions working in the same field, that is counselling itself, social work, family and marriage therapy, psychology and psychiatry. These professions claim to be distinct and struggle to identify themselves as having a unique quality which distinguishes them from the other similar professions.

Pistole and Roberts (2002) endorsed such a claim stating that it is “worthwhile for the professions to articulate their distinctions” (p.12) and assert that clarification is a way to gain legitimate recognition and a way of specifying roles in order to vie for the “public's sanctioning of the professional work” (p.13).

The role of training programmes in creating a collective professional identity

Hersehenson and Power (1987) give weight to the importance of training programmes in endorsing this distinction. Graduate and post graduate programmes mould students into the desired profession, creating a sense of belonging and diversity which establishes them into their career of choice.

In their study of the professional identity of school counsellors, Brott and Myers (1999) found that the process is a developmental one which spans across time. They
identified different stages of the counsellor professional identity development, ranging from the early days of the training programme and continuing throughout a counsellor’s career. They also discovered that counsellors in formation initially looked at external sources to define themselves, but this position shifted to an internalized ability to define their professional role as they gained experience working in the counselling field within a school setting. Other sources (Hall, 1987; Watts, 1987) reported that one’s early training in a profession is merely the beginning of professional growth and development. Ultimately, the counsellor’s role concept is determined by his or her individual personal guidelines evolving as the role is internalized on the job. These internalized personal guidelines may determine to a great extent what and how counselling is delivered.

**Counselling Professional Identity**

Counselling literature on the acquisition of professional identity borrows from and expands on the view that professional formation is a combination of knowledge acquisition through a professional and accredited training course, skills practice, the acquisition of experience, integrated with the personal attributes of the counsellor in the context of a professional community (Nugent & Jones, 2009; Gibson, Dollarhide & Moss, 2010). This process involves both intrapersonal and interpersonal process of development. According to Reisetter et al, (2004) a professional counsellor identity is acquired when counsellors identify themselves as being professionally competent. This process involves the integration of the personal worldview in the context of a professional community. Personal professional identity and collective professional identity work hand in hand to establish and maintain the profession. The professional community, which is a wider community than counsellors are also a factor that influences recognition of new professions within the professional community (Nugent & Jones, 2009; Reisetter et al, 2004).
The acquisition of a Collective Counselling Identity

Gale and Austin (2003) link the unique process of professional identity development to an emerging collective identity in the field of counselling. They express hope that, as more professionals enter the field through accredited thresholds, the counselling profession itself will be strengthened in its shared goals, resources and aspirations that shape and establish a collective professional identity.

Goodyear (1984) placed particular emphasis on the appreciation of the history of the counselling profession and likewise Mrdjenovich and Moore (2004) have described a sense of connection to historical factors as critical elements to professional identity development in counselling. These authors postulate a cyclical relationship between the personal and collective elements in the acquisition of the collective identity of counselling and identify research in counselling as one of the pillars in the establishment of a collective identity formation in counselling.

In the subsequent sections of this review I will be attempting to delve into how a collective cultural identity is emerging in three different cultural settings, namely the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Malta, and explore how or whether emerging counsellors in these three different places are being effected by the emergence or absence of a collective professional identity in the field of counselling.

I have chosen the UK and America because of the influence they have on the Maltese counselling scenario. Whilst connection to the British tradition is a historical one, Malta having been a colony of the British Empire for over two centuries; the American influence is relatively new and is mainly the result of the co-operation between the University of Malta and the University of Maryland through which the Masters Degree in Transcultural Counselling was born. This initiative has also provided an opportunity for a transcultural
summer school where Maltese and American counsellors come together to discuss, present their research and work together.

**How different countries experience the evolution of a collective counselling identity**

**History of Counselling in the United States of America.**

Counselling, or 'counseling,' in America has a strong tradition. The American Counseling Association (ACA) has been operative since 1952. There are over six hundred and sixty five thousand counsellors working in agencies, schools, organizations, private practice, personal and health care delivery systems, and other settings. These professionals work in a variety of sectors with people across their life span, from childhood through the senior years.

With a strong membership of over fifty thousand, the ACA is known nationwide; April of each year has been proclaimed as the Counsellor Awareness month across many states (Burtnett, 2011). American counsellors are well integrated in the different communities and are involved in and recognised for their work in the occurrence of tragedies of national dimensions, for example, the now famous ninth September terrorist attack on the twin towers, and other natural disasters as in the case of Hurricane Katrina in 2006, where counselling services were advertised and made available through the United States Department of National Security website and counsellors were integrated as essential members of emergency response teams in accordance with the National Response Plan (2007).

However, notwithstanding the fact that counselling in America has been established as a profession for nearly a century, ACA (2011) still advocates for a continued and continuous effort of counsellors towards a:
cohesive counsellor identity which leads to multiple benefits for professional counsellors, including the presentation of a clearer image of professional counselling to clients, students, and the general public, and the promotion of legislative efforts that are in the best interest of the counselling profession and the people we serve. (Rationale section, para. 1), implying that a collective counselling identity is still not as cohesive as the Association desires it to be, and that a counselling identity in this nation where counsellors are part of the professional tradition is in a continuous state of being established.

In her unpublished doctorate thesis, Lanman (2011) claims that the counselling profession (in America) is all the time continuing to make progress in establishing a unified counselling identity and implies that the role of counselling educators is a crucial one in forging a counselling identity both on a professional level and on a collective one. She postulates professional identity as a complicated, multi-layered issue that exists on a macro (profession-wide) and micro (individual) level, and advocates studying how individual counsellors develop and define their professional counselling identity as a means to strengthen and fortify the collective identity of professionals across the counselling sphere. Her study indicates the enormous impact of counsellor trainers on their students and on the development of both micro and macro identities. She found that counsellor educators often pass on their frustration with lack of counsellor identity cohesiveness to their students, and that this factor might be influencing students towards or away from a collective identity.

**History of counselling in UK.**

Proctor (1993) traces the beginning of counselling in United Kingdom towards the year 1950 when the discipline was imported from the United States of America. Baginsky (2004) states that it was only in the 1960s that counselling was established in UK schools
following the need for recognition of the service in schools through the Newsom Report (1963). Hans Hoxter, one of the founding fathers of the profession; lobbied extensively to introduce training courses and to establish counselling centres in the universities of Keele and Reading in the sixties. With training in counselling mushrooming all over the country it was expected that the discipline would flourish and that a strong collective identity would be formed.

In spite of all efforts of British counsellors lead by Hoxter, counselling in the UK did not enjoy political backing and did not blossom at the expected rate. By 1987 there were only ninety counsellors in six local education authorities (Hooper & Lang, 1988). Lang (1999, p. 4) claims that the reason for the decline was that the service was “uncoordinated and problematic” thus implying a weak collective counselling identity; but EMIE’s report (Dept. of Education and Skills, 1997), based on a survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, gave other reasons as they found examples of counselling being given by educational psychologists, education social workers and behaviour support teams who were not necessarily professional counsellors, even though they may have had some training in counselling.

There is discourse in the United Kingdom that the definition of counselling is quite diffused and that it includes “careers interviews”, “ad hoc advice”, and “crisis conversations in the corridor” (Mosley, 1993, p. 104). There is also some lack of clarity between what is meant by counselling and psychotherapy, and between counselling, counselling skills and helping skills (Lloyd, 1999). All this seems to point at a weak sense of a collective identity which seems like being reflected in lack of employment prospects. A quick search on the internet points towards lower wages for counselling jobs when compared to similar positions for psychologists and social workers who are engaged more regularly than counsellors within the National Health System.
The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2001) is, however, quite positive about the future of counselling in the UK and claims a “significant increase” (p. 8) in the number of counsellors employed by schools. Mc Leod (2007) is likewise positive and says that counselling in the United Kingdom has come a long way in the last half century and that it is in a process of re-establishing itself. Bor et al. (2002) are of the same opinion and note a resurgence of counselling in schools since teachers cannot cope with a pastoral and teaching load as was expected of them when counselling was seen as an added and unrequired luxury in the education system (Baginsky 2004).

To compensate for the lack of opportunities in school counselling and in the national health service, the discipline has branched out to other areas such as, for example, marriage counselling, community counselling, etc. (Bor et al 2002); many counsellors have set up a private practice in their community.

Overall, it is seems safe to assume that the British counselling identity is weaker than the collective professional identity of American counsellors. However, this discrepancy in collective identity does not reflect itself in the professional formation of individual counsellors, indicating that personal acquisition of professional identity is not wholly dependent on the collective although a sense of collective identity might be helpful in integrating the novice counsellor into the profession.

There are currently no laws in the UK regarding counselling and psychotherapy, represented mainly by the BACP but also by other associations which include the Confederation of Scottish Counselling Agencies (COCSA); Counsellors and Psychotherapist in Primary Care (CPC) and the Counselling Society (CS) amongst others. However, BACP guidelines recommend that, in order to practice, counsellors should have completed at least an appropriate diploma and a minimum of 400 hours therapy training (BACP, 2010).
History of Counselling in Malta.

Counselling in Malta seems to have, until lately, followed the path of counselling in the United Kingdom with the difference that the first instances of counselling are traced in the spiritual sphere rather than in the educational sector.

In its early days, that is, prior to 1968 counselling in Malta was, according to Mifsud (2008), the sole domain of the clergy in Malta. The Cana Movement was set up in 1959 to assist engaged couples or couples planning to get engaged; later on it extended its services to couples in distress or facing problems. Other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were involved in helping workers or young people deal with a variety of problems. Religion and politics at this time were interwoven into the local culture and De Giovanni (1997) says that personal counselling at this particular time was mainly concerned with providing spiritual direction and pastoral care and that youth workers in the local scene were often guided by the clergy.

The same author, (DeGiovanni 1987), historically traces another emerging need, this time within the context of vocational guidance and counselling. As far back as 1918-1930 the Superintendent of Immigration, by the surname of Casolani, complained that the educational system in Malta produced only “clerks to work with the British forces and did not take into consideration the emerging needs of the local economy or the economy of the countries that the Maltese immigrants were migrating to” (Reports of the Working of Government Departments 1924-5, C2, para. 9 cited by Sultana (1992, pp. 130-131). DeGiovanni, 1987 and Sultana 1992 interpret this complaint as the first documented reference to the need for direction and professional reflection in empowering school leavers towards desired employment within the contextual job market.

Prior to 1968 guidance and counselling was not organized locally but was provided through various NGOs (De Giovanni, 1987). It was only in 1968 that the Guidance and
Counselling Unit within the Education Department started to function, following the recommendation of Lewis (1967). Groups of teachers were sent to Britain, Canada and America to train as counsellors, but the majority of them did not return to the department. Some of them followed specialized courses in counselling psychology and educational psychology. Notwithstanding this setback, in 1975 the post of counsellor was officially recognized by the Department, together with the post of guidance teacher and education officer. Ten posts were opened for counsellors, following an agreement with the Malta Union of Teachers. This was one of the first milestones which created a clearer boundary between two similar yet different disciplines; however, the confusion of boundaries continued to predominate the local scene when the first Diploma course in Educational Guidance and Counselling was offered by the University of Malta in 1985.

There is a vacuum of literature in the area of how counselling has developed locally in the last twenty seven years, but from my research I note that nothing much happened in the area during the last twenty years or so in spite of the advocacy of MACP to promote counselling as a profession and to restructure the training courses in the last decade. Counselling courses at post-graduate level continued to be offered at the University of Malta (UoM) for teachers only at ad hoc intervals and, according to Mifsud (2007), around eight Maltese counsellors obtained their qualification abroad, (mostly in the United Kingdom.

In 2008, previous efforts of the MACP together with personal efforts of a few counsellors in the field (led by Dr. Dione Mifsud, the coordinator of the Masters courses) started to gain momentum and applications for the first Masters in counselling course offered at the University of Malta were heavily subscribed as the need for a counselling course at Masters level had long been felt. From there onwards an avalanche of training opportunities was set in motion. In 2010 another four year part-time course was offered to an additional twenty four students at UoM, and the following year another two-year full time course in
Transcultural Counselling was offered. Currently, this course is being jointly delivered by UoM and University of Maryland, USA. In total there are fifty eight students following a Masters in counselling course in Malta, twenty seven of whom will graduate in November 2012. These students are specialised in health counselling, community counselling, and young people and adolescents.

In the meantime counselling jobs have opened up to Masters in Counselling fourth year students within the Education Department, with the MACP advocating similar opportunities in the area of community and health counselling.

The MACP, which was founded only a decade ago, is working hard to have counselling recognised as a profession. Presently, as things stand, ”everyone can call himself a counsellor, set up shop and receive clients, simply because there is no law governing counselling” (Mifsud, 2007). Work on a code of ethics has been finalized and the association is organizing an awareness campaign aimed at nurturing a collective counselling identity and creating an awareness of need of counselling in the Maltese community.

In my opinion, a lot will depend on the proposed counselling act which will upgrade counselling to a professional level. Negotiations are well on the way but the final outcome will depend on a variety of different factors which include the input of other locally established professions already practicing in the area. In the meanwhile the collective identity of counsellors in Malta is being forged alongside the personal professional counselling identity of the locally trained counsellors.

The acquisition of a personal counselling identity

Do counselling students develop?

In the much quoted study of counsellor development, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) researched how counselling trainees and practitioners with five, ten and twenty five years’
experience in the field went through the different phases of their professional development. The cross-sectional design which was later extended into a longitudinal study asked the following questions:

- Do counsellors/therapists develop?
- Do all develop?
- What is the nature of changes therapists go through during their career?
- If there is change, how do therapists perceive the changes that have taken place?
- If a developmental perspective is relevant, is development continuous, erratic, cyclical, or can it be described otherwise. (p. 8)

The findings from this study sprouted into an avalanche of similar studies and reflections on the original findings. According to Goodyear et al. (2003), the work of Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992a) has been quite unique in that it is the first model of the sort to be derived from a qualitative study. It is also a model which challenges the assumption that therapist development occurs during graduate school or shortly after. Unlike models pertaining to different professions (e.g. pilots, accountants, lawyers, etc.), the achievement of expertise is seen in the model of Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992a) to be a lifelong journey and a lifelong process along which therapists acquire the experiences that season them and mould them into experts. It is worth noting, however, that these authors do not specify at what point advanced students and novices acquire professional identity.

In their paper entitled “The Journey of the Counsellor and therapist: Research findings and Perspectives on Professional Development”, Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003) revisited and revised their initial eight stages of counsellor development and collapsed these categories into six phases.
ACQUISITION OF A PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLING IDENTITY

- The Lay Helper phase
- The Beginning student phase
- The Advanced Student phase
- The Novice Professional phase
- The Experienced Professional phase, and
- The Senior Professional phase.

The authors take the reader through a journey of professional development which begins prior to the student entering the training programme. The idea here is that an aspiring counsellor needs to have a set of characteristics/attributes prior to setting foot into the profession. The raw qualities that can be refined through the training programme are present prior to training. In terms of the journey metaphor, the traveller who has embarked on the journey of becoming a counsellor needs to hurdle his talents and attributes together in preparation for the voyage. These attributes are a disposition of caring for others, and the capacity to listen and to understand that a person passing through a tough time needs support and attention. At this stage, however, lay helpers use their own experiences and life stories to attend to others. They often have problems with keeping to boundaries in dealing with the person or persons they are helping, and often project their own solutions when helping others. They often over involve themselves, are highly directive in the advice they give, and often sympathize rather than empathize with the client.

Fouad (2003) notes how moving from the lay helper phase to becoming a counselling student creates dissonance within students as they start to understand that their pre-conceived idea of a professional counselling is in fact different from what they are learning in their course. The dissonance between the externally “perceived” realities and the inner realities of the profession create anxiety and fear in most trainees, and shake and reshape the story of their aspired professional identity (Savickas 2000). Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003) state that
the very fact that the student moves from the field of knowing (how to be a lay helper) to that of the unknown (a student) is enough to create overwhelming feelings that fluctuate with the excitement that beginners experience when they first start a counselling course. This phase is characterized by dependence and vulnerability, and therefore trainers can really exert an impact on how students perceive themselves.

Howard et al., (2006) studied the perspective of trainee counsellors during their first year of studies and attempted to identify how and whether critical incidents have any impact whatsoever on the professional formation of counsellors. The study confirmed a former study by Skovholt and McCarthy (1988) who found that such critical incidents in the early years of training have lasting effects on the students’ perceptions of the therapeutic process, and their perceptions of themselves and of the counselling profession.

**The concept of change over time in a developing counsellor identity.**

Lerner (1986) posits that change is a development which implies

- a certain change,
- that change is organized systemically, and
- that change occurs over time.

The concept of change, patterns of change and duration (time) are therefore three factors that are quite pronounced in research that attempts to study counsellor development. This premise practically means that counsellors who enter masters programmes with different levels of counselling knowledge and practicum experience are at different thresholds of development, but does not indicate the rate at which novice counsellors develop in comparison to their more mature and experienced counterparts, or whether they can catch up with the latter at the late stages of their professional training.

I could not find any other research material connected to this area of counsellor development, which is one of the areas that I will be delving into in this project.
Counselling placements and counsellor development.

There is a body of literature that postulates that placement offers opportunities for rapid change in counselling students (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992a, 2003; Fong et al., 1997; Granello, 2002; Auxier, 2003; Orlinsky & Ronnestad, 2005; Skovholt, 2005; Puglia 2008; Emerson, 2010; Trotter-Matthison et al., 2010).

Many trainees report that the single most important factor contributing to their professional formation is practical experience in the field (Furr & Carroll, 2003). In their extensive international study Orlinsky and Ronnestad (2005) found that out of eight sources of counsellor and therapist development, placement training was the most scored developmental factor overall, and novices rated it only second to supervision. Trotter-Matthison et al. (2010) insist that placements are one of the most important “defining moments” of counsellor development, and in their introduction to their latest book “Voices from the Field, p.5” state that it does not require much reflection to understand that learning by doing allows the amalgamation of the theoretical element with the experience gained from practice, and that through this process professional development and cognitive development are facilitated.

Cognitive development and counselling students.

Recent research has been comparing the development of first and second year (full time) counselling students. Granello (2002) focused her investigation on the cognitive development of masters-level students, finding that first year trainees tended to be frustrated and searched for a ‘truth’ in counselling, whereas those ending the programme seemed to be more in acceptance of a reality incorporating ‘multiple truths.’ This study suggests an expansion of the cognitive ability in the area of reflexive thinking. Lyons and Hazier (2002) compared the empathic ability and cognitive development of a similar cohort of master counselling students and found a substantial and significant improvement in both domains.
Fong, Borders, Ethington & Pitts (1997) studied the relationship between counsellor cognitions and counsellor response behaviours across four levels of part time counselling students and found that students gained confidence in providing an effective counselling service after their practicum and that confidence levels continued to escalate throughout the course and the internship.

**The path from novice to expert.**

As students progress through the training process, and as they experience and understand the therapeutic relationship, they renew their interest in gaining expertise in specific therapeutic techniques. Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003) say that this is a different interest from that of a beginner who was interested in learning a technique; this time round the interest is to acquire and integrate skills as part of the formulation and formation of a therapeutic self.

A central development task that distinguishes experienced counsellors from novice counsellors is the creation of a role which is highly congruent with the individual’s self-perception, where counsellors feel that they can practice professionally and in an authentic way. If the working environment does not allow this congruent therapeutic self to emerge and grow, counsellors usually strive to change it. Some move to new employment whilst others opt for private practice (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003).

This is also a time characterized by increased confidence in working style, and by increased flexibility and increased trust in professional judgments (Casement, 1985; 2002). The more experienced counsellor is also more competent and knowledgeable on managing client/therapist boundaries and can therefore deal with more complex and demanding cases without feeling exhausted and depleted.

Drawing from a study of master therapists (Skovholt & Jennings, 2004) and a study of counsellor/therapist development versus stagnation (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1991, 2003),
Shovholt and Lennings (2005) mark four signposts that see the novice progress to professional expertise. They contend uniqueness in counsellor identity formation emphasising that no pattern of identity formation is like another since the process is so complex and is embedded in personal experiences. Throughout this process, which is marked by the fog of uncertainty (Skovholt 2005), counsellors need to learn how to stay with the unknown and how to deal with the anxiety that guides them from declarative knowledge (acquired through academic learning and training) to procedural knowledge (Anderson 1993) where counsellors are presumed to have acquired a rapid recognition of patterns and developed a schemata of understanding and of seeing beyond surface features (Chi et al., 1988).

The second signpost is the relevance of the practical element in counsellor formation. As referred to previously, practice consolidates learning; however, experience alone is not enough. According to Skovholt and Jennings (2005) this experience needs to be used within an environment that encourages growth and exploration. A central ingredient for transforming experience into expertise is the use of reflection (Neufeldt, Karno & Nelson, 1996).

Thirdly, Skovholt and Jennings (2005) acknowledge that although course structure supports the anxious novice to perform in times of uncertainty, it is certainly not the essence of the acquisition of expertise. What is important is the realization that the professional identity of the counsellor is a lifetime journey and that counsellors become more expert with every client they encounter and with every experience that they live through if they reflect upon it and allow themselves to develop through it.

The final signpost posits that the pattern of professional counsellor formation matches personal life stages. This process starts with childhood where spontaneity is associated with the eagerness to help others in the pre training phase. Adolescent awkwardness is compared
to the discomfort felt in the years of formal academic training. Adulthood is a three stage process until personal uniqueness is mastered and practiced.

**Conclusion**

This literature review offers a brief review of the emergence of the counselling profession in three different cultures. It seems that a strong collective identity is more related to recognition and establishment of the profession, with the underlying benefits of demands for counselling services, than to the acquisition of a professional identity of counsellors in formation.

Literature states that trainees are highly influenced by their educators in their acquisition of professional identity and all undergo unique processes of change when they move through the different phases of professional development. In counselling, the acquisition of a recognised qualification is only the beginning of a process towards expertise in the field, and therefore a counsellor acquires professional identity in an on-going process of development leading to different levels of expertise in the profession. The difference between professional status (status acquired after the completion of an accredited training course) and professional identity is highlighted throughout this chapter.

Although recent studies are targeting the development of students within the different phases of their development, the area concerned with previous experience in counselling related jobs and academic training in the field has not been looked into. Moreover, there are no studies on how masters’ students are forging their counselling identity in Malta.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Blue Bottles and Clay Shoes

The vase represents a feeling of wholeness and containment – the emergence of the therapeutic self. The blue bottles resemble the many phases and challenges of becoming a counsellor - some looked harder than they actually were. The bent bottles portray feelings: frustration, anxiety, discouragement, being doubtful and questioning. The clay shoes illustrate that the journey towards a professional identity is indeed a journey which finally ‘flowers’.

Self-Analysis of Visual Text - Participant Four
I chose the visual representation of Participant four to illustrate the methodology chapter because I experienced a similar and parallel process between my own personal counsellor identity acquisition and the emergence of my identity of a researcher. Another voyage was set in motion, fraught with hurdles, anxiety and tribulations which when overcome filled me with a sense of achievement and awe. Writing the methodology chapter gelled my researcher identity and my research project together.

**Background**

My study is concerned with the sequential development of the professional identity of Masters in counselling students, a group I myself form part of. I am curious to explore the narrative of how counsellors in training gain their professional identity; whether such identity equals the acquisition of expertise; whether this development occurs in steps or stages; or whether it is a dynamic and recursive movement. I am also interested about what factors play a part in this development towards professional identity.

According to Reissman (2000), narratives are a particularly significant genre for representing and analysing identity in its multiple guises and in different contexts. Hinchman and Hinchman (1997) claim that the power of the narrative analysis is an “active, self-shaping quality of human thought… the power of stories to create and re-fashion personal identity”.

I chose this particular methodology because narratives enable the researcher to encounter the perspectives of the participants as they develop from memories collected from the narrator’s experiences (Clandmin & Connelly, 2000). It is in telling stories that people create their sense of identity which is structured through the dominant stories that they choose to focus on. Yancy (2005) states that narratives of identity construction are not solipsistic
undertakings but are inevitably co-authored during dialogical interchanges. According to this author, narratives of an evolving (psychologist) identity are composed of remembered stories about past events that are modified by training and experiences of a professional in training in a social context.

As I researched narrative methodology I was initially overwhelmed by its vastness and seemingly unfathomable nature to the point that I started to investigate other more structured, conventional and safer ways of collating data. Moreover, no other methodology touched me or inspired me so deeply. Another process similar and in parallel to my acquisition of a professional counsellor identity was set into motion, another painstaking process fraught with hurdles, excitement, anxiety, much soul searching and cognitive processing wherein another identity started to emerge: the researcher identity.

I wanted my own stamp on the research process; this research was not to be another assignment to obtain my masters degree. However, I soon realised that the process of integrating such a narrative methodology into a research enquiry is no easy endeavour and that this type of research evolves over time through a continuous process of interaction with the participant and upon much reading and reflection.

**Structuring the research question in a narrative context**

Puglia (2008) and Emerson (2010) both stress the relationship between professional identity and counsellors knowing who they are and how they differ from other professionals in the mental health sector as one of the main ingredients in the acquisition of a personal and collective professional counselling identity. Gale and Austen, (2003), Pistole and Roberts, (2002), and Myers (1992) state that a precise counselling identity is yet to be articulated. They particularly emphasize that counsellors need to understand who they are as professionals and how they differ from other kindred professionals as part of their professional identity acquisition.
During the course of the literature review I have come to understand that narrative of how counsellors come to be - the stories behind their choice of profession; counsellor formation (training) and the events that shape the journey of their becoming are an integral part of an acquired professional identity. My understanding derived from literature (Auxier et al, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, 1995) and from personal experience is that counsellors integrate and weld a unique therapeutic self into their professional identity in an on-going journey throughout their evolving career. The context wherein the counsellor is evolving is also a part of the equation (Emerson, 2010; Nelson & Jackson, 2003). This understanding together with my personal experience of the counselling journey shaped the nature of my investigation.

**What is Narrative?**

Connely and Clandmin (1990) wrote that although the idea of narrative inquiry as a research methodology is relatively new to the social sciences, it has academic roots in the humanities under the broad heading of narratology. They interwove the phenomena of narration into the narrative inquiry.

By this we mean that narrative is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the pattern of inquiry for its study… Thus, we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

Riessman and Speedy (2006) and Riessman (2008) caution readers against a simple conceptualization of narratives and narrative research. They state that in everyday use the word narrative has come to mean everything and anything. Everyone has their story to recount but not all stories qualify towards a narrative research methodology. They propose
that the analytical dimension is the determining factor for a valid qualitative investigation. Rieissman and Speedy (2006) acknowledge the different analytical techniques that validate narrative research methodology, which include content and thematic analysis, and comment that there is no one fixed way in which narrative texts are analysed. Referring to the work of Gee (1991), they propose the use of stanza analysis as a powerful narrating and analytic tool. Meaning is extrapolated from the narrated text which is read and re-read several times over. The condensed text which captures the essence of the story interwoven with the feelings, experiences and beliefs is than crystallized into a stanza format.

Riessman (2008) proposes structural narrative analysis as a technique of choice to guide beginning investigators. This technique of clearly bounded narrative texts initiated by Labov and Waletsky (1962) and further developed by Labov (1982; 1972) investigates the text and places objectivity as one of the criteria for credible and reliable analysis. The latter work of Gee (1991), however, places structural analysis on another footing and proposes the interaction of the researcher within the research design as a dimension of richness within the study. Gee (1991) pays attention to the units of discourse in the narrated text. The interpretation of the meaning is derived from a close examination of units of speech: “idea units, lines, stanzas, strophes” (p.63). Riessman (2008) quotes Gee (1991) on how stanzas derived from units of speech have the capacity to fossilize and distil meaning and insists on the importance of listening to as well as reading narrative text and paying attention to tonality and the nuances of tone and language in capturing the full understanding of the narrative. Speedy (2008) adds her own dimension to this methodology. In her chapter on constructing poetic documents (p. 95) she recounts how her research methodology evolved from verse to stanzas when she realized that “scribbles, wiggles and words” connected together capture the spirit of the narrative. In her account of ‘Gregory’s story’ she delineates the co-writing of the verses that captured the essence and content of the account which she then sent over to
‘Gregory’ for his feedback and permission to use and publicize, in line with White (1995) who recommends participant feedback as one of the criteria for validity of the results.

The interaction between participant and researcher cannot therefore be underestimated. In this research project another factor needed to be taken into careful consideration: the fact of my two related identities, i.e. the identity of a researcher and the identity of a Masters in counselling student, undergoing a similar experience to that of the participants I am researching in the project.

**Subjectivity in Research**

The issue of subjectivity in qualitative research has led to much discussion and debate. Gilbert (1998) proclaims the need to control this variable. Whilst Mucchieli (1979) postulates a near zero tolerance to subjectivity and recommends strictly adhering to the text as a means of ensuring objectivity in qualitative research, other authors advocate the harnessing of personal experience as an added resource in comprehending and analysing qualitative data (Schneider, 1999; Rennie, 1994). For Patton (1990) the utilisation of standardised or semi-standardised methods to distance the researcher from the subject of enquiry does just that - it only keeps the subject at a distance and loses much depth in the process.

Drapeau (2002) takes a mid-way position and, whilst acknowledging the added richness of subjectivity in qualitative methodology, concedes that it can also potentially lead research findings off track unless it is not adequately addressed by the researcher.

I realised that in my particular enquiry an objective methodology would greatly hinder the research process, robbing it of all the personal insight and experience of my own counselling journey towards a professional counselling identity. Professing objectivity in my particular circumstance would mean that I am not aware, and therefore not in control of, my interpretations and analysis, putting my research at a greater risk of unconscious projective
interpretation and of enmeshing my experiences with those of the other participants through repression (Perry, 1990).

After careful consideration, I felt that the wisest choice was to acknowledge my involvement in the process, to acclaim it as an added richness and resource in my project, but also to create a structure that keeps me alert about my own involvement when interpreting and analysing the findings.

**Addressing the issue of subjectivity in my research.**

I took the following steps to address the issue of subjectivity in my research project:

- I piloted the narrative interview and discussed the process with the first research participant, amending the semi-structured questionnaire after the feedback from the interaction. The addition of the visual representations came from such an interaction.

- I kept in touch with the participants throughout the research process, sending them copies of the transcribed, translated and later extrapolated text and categories of themes emerging from the analysis, processing the feedback into the texts.

- I sent copies of the poetic stanzas to the participants for feedback, approval and consent; amending where indicated by the participants.

- I referred to my journal to refresh my experience of the counselling journey.

- I triangulated the narrated text with the visual text constructed by participants and specifically asked the participants to create grids where they deconstructed the picture into distinctive parts and attribute meaning to the visual text themselves and matched their analysis of the visual text with the result findings of the text (e.g. from the grid of Participant One: The Becoming)
The movement – the drawing gives the impression that there is a kind of a centrifugal force, pulling things towards the centre.

The feeling is that of coming together, a process of becoming. A feeling of tension and healthy anxiety while stretching towards the future.

Things that have an identity of their own come together in a meaningful way. However the fluidity remains. During my years of training and practice as a counsellor, I reflected a lot on different aspects of my life and different experiences, coming to an identity which is always in the making.

Method

Research Protocol.

Six participants were chosen from the first cohort of Masters in counselling students. The participants were interviewed in their last semester of a four-year part time training course at a time when they were working on their thesis on their own, that is, when formal academic training had come to an end and when students were either finished from their 600 practicum hours or were finishing them off. All results had been published and students knew that they were successful in their formal studies.

All trainees had at least undergone the forty two hours of supervision hours included in the course, and as many additional hours necessary according to practicum requirements. They had finished or nearly finished fifty hours of personal therapy, which was another course requirement.

Research Participants.

Student composition was as follows: two men and four women aged between twenty nine and forty eight years.

Participant-selected pseudonyms were used to protect participant confidentiality.
Students were selected from amongst three categories. These categories were structured in relation to the experience that trainees had in counselling prior to entering the course.

1. **Category A:** Those students who had a postgraduate diploma in counselling or therapy and who worked in counselling or a related field prior to entering their counsellor training programme.

2. **Category B:** Those students whose first degree was in a discipline (psychology, social work, education) that enabled them to do some counselling-related work (helping skills) prior to entering their counsellor training programme; e.g. guidance or personal and social development teachers.

3. **Category C:** Those students who had no prior counsellor training or related working experience before they entered their counsellor training programme and whose first degree lay in an area outside counselling; e.g. a biology teacher.

**Purposeful sampling.**

I recruited the participants by using a judgment sampling technique in a non-random manner (Miles & Huberman, 1994); (Patton, 2001,1998) ensuring an ‘information rich’ sample. I chose a stratified purposeful sample (Patton, 2001,1998) to enable me to illustrate characteristics of the three subgroups mentioned previously. This method also facilitates comparison between subgroups.
Procedure

**Questionnaire.**

I set up a semi-structured questionnaire based on the literature review to explore the research questions. The questionnaire Appendix C included questions which explored the similarities and differences in the narrative of how these students moved towards their professional identities.

The semi-structured questions prompted the narratives around:

a) Retrospective aspect (pre-counselling experiences that effected choice of course).

b) The narration of the actual counselling journey (difficulties, critical incidents and other experiences which shaped the counselling identity).

c) How or whether the course content contributed to the acquisition of a professional counselling identity.

d) The development of a counselling professional identity within the Maltese context.

The interview was piloted and slightly amended as indicated on Appendix C. The pilot interview was included in the study. As a measure to explore and respect individual life stories, I did not ask all questions in every interview nor did I ask questions in a particular order (Clandmin, 2006). I began each interview more or less in the same manner, thanking the participants for accepting to be interviewed, familiarizing them with my research topic, and asking them how they came to enter into the profession. From then onwards I allowed the participants to direct the interview.
The length of interviews ranged between fifty and ninety minutes. With the participant’s recorded consent, the interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. This was merely a time-saving measure from my part which was only directed towards the actual act of transcribing the text from tape to paper. Aware that this measure might carry the danger of distancing me from the richness of text, I listened to the recordings many times over, at times with the text in my hands, noting down change in tonalities, innuendos. I paid attention to silence and what it communicated, to body language, to moments of uneasiness, to moments of connection, keeping an eye open to any form of verbal and non-verbal communication.

The visual projects evolved from the pilot to complement the interview. Illustrations capture another dimension in storytelling. Harper (1994) and Punch (1998) maintain that visual representation is helpful in the process of getting to know ourselves; it actually allows us to communicate statements to others that could not be done in words.

The participants also reflected on their own visual project in written format, adding yet another dimension to their story as they included their own interpretation of the illustration that they chose to portray their counselling journey towards professional identity. All but one of the pictures were original projects/photos. Participant five used free clip art/photographs in her representation of owl, balloons and clover.

Analyzing the text

My approach in analysing the text evolved from the works of Riessman (2008), Speedy (2008) and Riessman and Speedy (2006). After transcribing and translating parts of the texts into English language to enable my supervisor to read them, I approached the narrative accounts by first reading and re-reading and then hearing the audio tapes many times over. I noted down tonality, hesitation, emphasis and other nuances alongside the text. The next step involved the extraction of ideas units in line with Gee (1991) and Speedy
(2008). I extrapolated and numbered these idea units and later extracted them as separate texts (vide Appendix D. Re-reading the condensed text, I noted that text acquired two distinct features:

1. There was a certain flow and rhythm within the text that could easily be woven into poetic form.
2. The condensed ideas formed a very powerful narrative.

Writing the poetic stanzas.

The next step involved the collating of the extracted text into poetic stanza form. I took a decision to compose the poetic text from the perspective of the researcher and not of the participant in order to create a boundary that safeguards to some extent the issue of projective identification in subjective research methodologies (Drapeau, 2002).

Sending the results to the participants for feedback, I later incorporated their suggestions and amendments into the text. The question of whether to include all the results from this analytic exercise answered itself when I asked for permission to publish the poetic stanzas and noticed the hesitation of four of the six participants. For ethical reasons I opted to include only the texts of the two participants who had readily and without hesitation responded to my request, as I understood that the relationship that I had with all participants might leave them feeling uneasy and therefore not free to reject my proposal.

The poetic stanzas of participants one and four were included in the results section. It would have been very enriching to include all the material, as they portrayed a step by step account of how all participants obtained their professional acquisition at different points along their course of study, highlighting the uniqueness of the process in each and every case. However I opted for anonymity for those participants who I felt were not fully comfortable with the possibility of having their identity discovered, sacrificing some of the results due to
ethical considerations; hoping that the discussion of the results would level this discrepancy
and bring out the findings through a different way which safeguarded anonymity.

**Compiling and comparing emerging themes**

*The integration of the visual project with the written text.*

Polkinghorne (2007) wrote about validity threats arising in narrative research because
“the languaged description given by participants of their experienced meaning is not a
mirrored reflection of this meaning” (p.10). He professes that assembled texts in narrative
research are at times limited by the very fact that experience is more complex than the
articulated text and that, although interviewers may assist participants to come closer to the
intricacy of their experiences by encouraging the use of figurative language and metaphorical
expression, participants are able to articulate only part of the meaning that they can access
through reflection. This implies that other parts of the meaning are lost and cannot be
accessed through language alone. He goes on to suggest various ways by which interviewers
can help the interviewee sink into various layers of consciousness whilst remaining at the
level of linguistic expression.

Riessman (2008) dedicates a whole chapter of her book to visual representation in
narrative methodology and claims that visual representation can also be amalgamated with
text to offer “another story containing different viewings” (p. 166) which delve deeper into
the domain of feelings and which bring into awareness reflections about the self which might
not have surfaced otherwise (Riessman, 2008). Thematic representation can be extracted
from visual text using different techniques, e.g. Du Preez and Ross (2008) wherein
participants themselves interpret the pictures.
I found it almost second nature to include a visual text to collaborate or otherwise contradict the written text. The idea emerged during the interview sessions and served a twofold purpose:

1. To triangulate the data obtained from the written text.
2. To extend the interviews and give participants more time to reflect on the narrative that they shared during the interviewing process, utilizing a different medium to help them express themselves on another level of awareness.

I included the grid and the instructions to break down the visual representation into different categories in an attempt to structure the thoughts and feelings that the images provoked within the participants. I did not attempt to interpret the visual representations in any way as the purpose of this additional data was to substantiate or otherwise dispute the research findings. The visual text was broken down by participants themselves into three different grids:

a. Description of object
b. Feelings associated with object
c. Reflection about units of feelings and own reflections (vide Appendix D).

The breakdown of the visual images into the above categories is suggested by Du Preez and Ross (2008) as an attempt to deconstruct the discourse of power/knowing on the part of the researcher, but in this particular research project I felt that it also served the purpose of checking out the data collected through stanza and content analysis with the interpretation given by the participants themselves.

The feedback obtained by five of the six participants was that the visual texts were very effective in helping them see themselves as acquiring a professional identity.
Ethical considerations

Permission from the Board of Studies of the Masters in counselling course as well as from the Ethics Committee of the University of Malta was obtained for this research. A letter of informed consent was sent to participants through email to enable them to freely accept or refuse to participate in the project. All participants accepted to partake in the interviewing process. Sending the letter of consent through email also opened up the possibility of amending the contents of the letter to suit participants who later signed a hard copy of the said consent form/ (vide Appendix B). Participants were assigned numbers (one to six) and chose pseudonyms matching their visual projects to protect their identities. These fictitious names were used throughout in conjunction with the participant’s number.

As added measures of ethical practice, participants were given copies of transcribed text and stanza analysis, and had the possibility to give feedback to amend text or opt out completely. Four participants showed slight hesitation in having the poetic text analysis put in the dissertation, and although they did not object I did not include the analysed text in the results section. The decision to safeguard anonymity of these candidates meant that I could not portray the development of all the participants equally but nevertheless I felt that inspite of this disadvantage the two texts managed to capture the acquisition of the counselling identity well enough.
Throughout these four years there were times when I felt that the steps were insurmountable. I even felt that I did not have the physical or mental capacity to move forward in this direction. But my interest and passion for this work are what drive me. So patiently and persistently I continue…..one step at a time.

Self-Analysis of Visual Text: Participant two – The Curious Child
This chapter is intended to bridge the two halves of the dissertation. I decided to present the raw data in the form of two poetic stanza analysis. This data stands on its own two feet and presents the strong, condensed and vivid narrative of the counselling journey towards the acquisition of a counselling professional identity.

It is immediately apparent that the two participants are at different stages of their professional development. Participant four has just embraced her professional identity as a result of her narrative interview, whilst participant one seems to be at an advanced stage of his professional formation, having followed two post graduate diplomas in counselling and a related discipline. Participant one works as a counsellor whilst participant two works is a guidance teacher.

These two narratives are a testimony of the complex, dynamic and unique process that counsellors in training undergo during the process of forging a counselling professional identity.
Participant One – Becoming

The past and the present walk hand in hand
His father’s qualities married to his experiences
Made him who he is today.
Responsibility was something he grew up into;
Loved and held but not spoilt
He managed to capture the energy of his needs
And transfer it to a positive empowering force.

“Knowledge is power”, he says
Tracing the origins of his thirst for wisdom.
He also knows why he walks with his clients along the way
Rather than do things for them
’Cause it was done for him that way he says.

Counselling is a continuous journey,
Where new meanings are being generated, new understanding develops
As resources carried along the way
Are re-organised, re-visited
And knowledge acquires a deeper and more profound understanding.
Continuation marries new experiences.
Links develop through reflexivity,
So central to counsellor development.
He has a clear preference
For a systemic post-modern stance,
Perceiving his client as the expert of his life and of the process
And himself as a partner in the dance
Responding to the need, pace and rhythm of his clients along the way.

Describing his development through the beautiful metaphor
Of a high resolution screen continually upgraded with new pixels
That paint a sharper, clearer image.
He perceives himself at a point of his counselling voyage,
Where he is acquiring a deeper understanding of the process.

Counsellors are not technicians he says,
They integrate skills within themselves and use themselves
In the counselling process.
Every counsellor is unique!!
Training is but the base
From which professional identity departs.
The rest is practice, integration, reflexivity, experience
Which every professional integrates and links in a different way
In a continuous never-ending process
Which makes us different from other professionals.
Who are seen to arrive at the end of a training process.
Therapy, supervision, journal-keeping are tools
Which accompany the traveller in the life journey
And towards professional acquisition.
Every trainee uses them to his exclusive needs
In the ratio required.
He especially values the Restorative aspect of supervision;
Supervision is a sacred space where professional knowledge is passed over
From supervisor to trainee.

His past training in counselling is no longer seen
As a repetition, a waste of time.
Rather it is a blessing, a chance to look more deeply into the theory
And linking it more profoundly with his practice and within his
Therapeutic self.
If he had to do it all again it would most likely take him
To places not yet visited, not yet explored.

This makes him reflect that different trainees are at different points
Of their learning process,
Depending on a number of factors
That include past experience, background, practice……
Until slowly the learning process becomes second nature, an attitude,
A way of being and becoming.
Four years are just about right to
Simmer and cement together the different aspects of the course.
The Masters compared to other training programmes sees theory as especially important. The Master needs to know as well as experience... and of course integrate the components together along the journey seen as never ending…….

The training programme consolidates past learning and launches the trainee on a professional level.

For a counsellor professional identity to emerge, the trainee might need to shed other identities, and to include himself in the collective counsellor identity. Affiliation within counselling bodies consolidates professional identity formation.

We are a particular group. Having been taught by kindred professionals, we have brought them together. This should help in our warranting.
Participant Four - Blue Bottles and Clay Shoes

Choosing counselling was an obvious choice,
She was always into helping,
Listening and attending to others.
Struggled to find her career path
But from the onwards counselling was a
Natural progression.

Her previous studies helped her to
Grasp theoretical concepts faster and
Critical incidents both good and bad
Forged her counselling identity.

Therapy is a ‘God sent requirement’ because
As a novice she could process, reflect and grow.
Sensitivity training was described as a deeply entrenched experience whilst
Group counselling helped her collective counsellor identity to emerge.
She has grown cognitively through a combination of
Theory, experience and reflection,

Am I good enough?,
Do I understand enough?
Are questions that haunted her innermost soul
As novice anxiety struck …………….
Then came the realization that one can only be
Good enough.

And with the resolution and aided by supervision,
She commenced her placements
Taking care to strike a balance between extending her
Experience as much as possible
And reserving energy to maintain the most meaningful
Personal relationships
Given that she married in her traineeship.

Acknowledging that everyone is unique
She now recognises that the duration of the course
Is intended to be a process of maturation,
Where theory and practice are integrated,
Where supervision mentors the novice
Who like a secure child is bonded to the
Significant other
And ventures to new thoughts and practice.

Internalizing the supervisor
Soothes the anxiety of working alone
And builds competence and knowledge
In the emerging professional
Indeed…..
Reading about something she says
And seeing it unfold in practice is not quite the same,
So the length of the process ensures a comprehensive understanding
Before one becomes a Master
One must gain a multitude of experiences…..

For the journey is a long and arduous one
And anxiety accompanies the trainee to some degree till the end
As questions of Will I make it?
Will I succeed to become a counsellor?
Do I have what it takes?
Haunt the traveller along the journey of becoming.

There are pitfalls along the way,
Personal life gone wrong,
Constant worries……
Four years is a long time
And anything can happen along the way.
Like meeting more travellers (trainees),
Forging new friendships,
With some and not with others.
Will the friendships last?

There is light as she nears the finishing line,
A deep sense of achievement….
Still the doubt remains,
The voyage is not over yet…
That is how she is, she says.
I will not say that I am a counsellor until I arrive
At the end…
For it is the students who decide where and when
They choose to acquire
The identity of the counsellor.
Personality plays a great part in the transition
Towards the newly acquired identity she states.

And yet this narration has
Brought her near to the realization
That she has been there for a long time,
SHE IS A COUNSELLOR.
She finally says it!!
The counsellor within her finally emerged!!!!
She has decided that the time and place is here!!!
Hurrah!!.....An unmistakable feeling of joy and peace prevails.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Results

The Integration

“The integration of myself and the other - ‘them’ developing as a result of a new way of seeing... The lense which represents a renewed way of looking at myself and the other”

Self Analysis of Visual Text: Participant 3

(Text underlined by participant)
As I worked on my thesis I started to liken the process to the counselling voyage itself: a time of exciting discovery, anxiety, anticipation and momentary discouragement until the thesis started to come together. The discussion of the results represents a point in time when everything started to merge. As the literature review was revisited and compared to the results obtained, a new and deeper understanding of the acquisition of a counselling professional identity started to emerge in my mind.

The visual representation of Participant 3 entitled “The Integration” was chosen to represent this process because in my opinion it fits perfectly with how the process of knowledge acquisition was integrated with the research.

Results and ensuing discussion are presented in four main categories:

1. Feelings and experience encountered along the journey.
2. The counselling journey.
3. Acquisition of a professional counselling identity.
4. The Maltese cultural context.
Research findings

Feelings and Experiences

The journey towards a professional counsellor identity carries the trainee into an array of emotions that have been eloquently described by the research participants in their narrative interview, in the poetic stanzas and in their interpretation of the visual texts.

All participants, irrespective of previous background and training, experienced a range of emotions that were directly related to their counselling journey and the acquisition of a professional identity.

“Uncertainty, the weight related to the length of the journey ahead, knowing that it entailed much more than an academic journey. The joy of discovering novel dimensions.”

Participant three - “The Integration” (words underlined by participant)

“Frustration, anxiety, discouragement, doubtful, questioning”

Participant four - “The Blue Bottles”

“My legs and feet have strengthened somewhat and I’m on a journey of exploration. This fills me with a cocktail of different feelings fluctuating between curiosity, wonder, awe, anticipation, apprehension, anxiety, enthusiasm, excitement.”

Participant two - “The Curious Child”

To a different degree, all students felt anxious, stressed out, doubtful, discouraged, questioning (will I make it?), frustrated, apprehensive, satisfied, excited, enthusiastic and accomplished. Participants two and five experienced a sense of curiosity, participants two and three reported feeling a sense of wonder and awe, and participants one and three spoke of a feeling of integration, a coming together and a process of becoming.
“The feeling is that of coming together, a process of becoming. A feeling of tension and healthy anxiety while stretching towards the future.”

Participant one - “The Becoming”

All participants think that a counselling professional status is imperative in the acquisition of a counselling professional identity (CPI). To a different degree, all counsellors express a sense of apprehension and worry, mingled with a state of excitement and expectations about the acquisition of the warrant. Some candidates have expressed feelings of discrimination by other kindred professionals which they attribute to the discrepancy between counsellor formation and lack of warranting. All participants feel that their course equipped them with all the requisites of professional acquisition and that they are in stages of acquiring it. However, warranting is still being negotiated and therefore as yet not acquired. This dissonance creates a tension and a sense of frustration which in my opinion resonates throughout the whole cohort of Masters in counselling students.

Literature about counsellor training and counsellor professional identity refers continuously to the spectrum of feelings that counsellors in formation experience in their training process. Trotter-Matthison et al. (2010) provide experiential narratives of counsellors’ emotional voyage towards professional identification in much the same way as those experienced by research participants in this study. These authors hold that the emotional component is one of the “defining moments” in professional acquisition of counsellors and therapists. This component is what possibly distinguishes counsellors and kindred professionals from other professions like, accountants, lawyers etc. where emotional maturity is not a requisite for professional acquisition (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992(a),(b); 2003).
These findings are therefore a very important part of this research. Visual representations were used to aid, amplify and triangulate the narrative text, thus enhancing the research findings.

**The Counselling Journey**

“It’s like being on a journey, I am carrying a lot of things and as I am going along I am organizing these things differently… generating different meanings. You have certain meanings of continuation or commonality, you are still there but you will be developing new understandings”. Participant 1 – The Becoming

“I see myself as being on a journey of becoming one. But ‘one’ does not mean that everything is in place. This one has many aspects but it is still integrated. It is never ending.” Participant 2 - Curious child

All participants adopted the metaphor of “The Counselling Journey” and all defined this journey as a process starting much before their counsellor training programme, sometimes stemming as far back as their childhood. All relate this journey to the acquisition of a counselling professional identity and all but one (participant five) conceive this journey as not having a clear defined finishing line. In fact, this journey is perceived as a never ending process.

This finding is in perfect congruence with literature on the topic. Several authors refer to counsellors as being on a constant, life-long journey (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992a; 2003; Foaud, 2003; Auxier et al, 2003). The journey is located before formal academic training and accompanies the professional throughout life.

Nine themes fitted under the category counsellor journey.
Pre Counselling Attributes.

“Part of my identity of who I am and where I stand now is related to my life stories before the course commenced.”

From Participant 3: The Integration

“A person that is or aspires to be a counsellor, needs to be open for everything; open for oneself and open for whom you are with. Other attributes would be:

a. Feet to the floor; not big headed,
b. That I feel that you are gentle,
c. Ready to build a relationship with the person”.

From Participant 2: The Curious Child.

All participants identified attributes within themselves and within those aspiring to take up a counselling career. The common attributes were the ability to listen and to maintain a relationship. Other qualities were a capacity to be consistent and congruent, to be patient, kind, gentle, humble, non-judgemental, open for cultural diversity, an ability to reflect deeply, an ability to integrate and link thoughts, and able to help others reflect and to be creative.

Participants identified various role models in their lives who helped them develop these characteristics. Participant one identified his parents as his role models and said that their simplicity, their holding and lack of it, their values and the way that they supported him without weighing him down with expectations has made him who he is today.

Other participants identified life events which marked them and helped to forge their counselling identity. Participants one, three and five identified the suffering following the
death of a loved one as raising awareness about the importance of reaching out for help in troubled times, whilst participants two and six recognized how a previous “bad” experience of counselling made them persevere and aspire to be of service to others in a different way than they had experienced.

These results are again echoed in theory which stipulates that first decisions to commence a counselling journey are often located in childhood and in the family home (Shelton, 2010), and in conquering personal life events or tragedies (Mc Lennon, 2010), and are influenced by early role models (Lerner, 2010). Koltz and Champe (2010) refer to the complexity behind choosing a career in counselling and state that, notwithstanding indications referred to in literature, matters are complex and not yet fully understood. However, in this research the identification with the journey commencing in early childhood and in reaction to particular life events is a dominant story in all the participant narratives.

**Conceptualization of counselling.**

Reading through the scripts I noticed a difference between those participants who had been immersed in counselling or a related topic before their training period (participants one to four) and the two participants who were relatively new to the field. Whilst the first four participants could see themselves develop a sharper and deeper perception of what they had already experienced in their work with clients, participant six experienced substantial discomfort in modifying her view of counselling from a position of “advice giving” to that of helping clients reflect and arrive at their own idea of what is best for them; participant five seemed to still base her idea of counselling on her own experience of therapy prior to entering the course. From the research findings it seems that participants are at different stages of integrating the concept of counselling within their professional and therapeutic self, and that experience in the field is one of the factors influencing their understanding of the counselling profession.
These findings replicate literature on the topic as stage theorists postulate that in the phase that corresponds to that of the participants taking part in the research, that is the Advanced Student Phase (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003) functions in an in-between space; between beginner and professional status. However, what this research is indicating is that previous experience in the field may, alongside with other factors, be a contributing factor to processes of internalization, integration and conceptualization of counselling.

According to Puglia (2009), a mature and integrated conceptualization of the counselling philosophy is one of the markers of professional acquisition of Masters in counselling students. The participants in the study are found to be at different stages of achieving this important requisite and are therefore seen to be in different stages in their developmental journey towards a professional counselling identity.

Novice Trainees.

Am I good enough?,

Do I understand enough?

Are questions that haunted her innermost soul

As novice anxiety struck ……………

Then came the realisation that one can only be

Good enough.

And with the resolution and aided by supervision,

She commenced her placements

Taking care to strike a balance between extending her

Experience as much as possible

And reserving energy to maintain the most meaningful

Personal relationships

From Stanza Analysis – Participant 4
The above stanza typifies the experience that all participants experience or recall experiencing in the novice stage. Participants experienced the jump between theoretical instruction and practice characteristically as a time when they felt a lot of tension, uncertainty, anxiety and self-doubt. Such findings resonate literature about novice anxiety (Skovholt & Ronnestad 1992a & b, 2003; Hazler & Kottler, 2005; White, 2009), amongst other feelings.

They also acknowledged a conscientious initial sense of unpreparedness and a feeling of being overwhelmed since they understood and were aware of the intricacies of the therapeutic alliance and the responsibility of the counsellor in this relationship. Participant four commented that the “Reading about something and seeing it unfold in practice is not quite the same,” whilst participants three, five and six recommended more support at this stage and asked for opportunities to observe other counsellors at work and to be supervised live as a way of relieving novice tension and anxiety in future cohorts.

Resolution of this anxiety was also referred to in this research. For example, participant four realized that she can only be “good enough”, which a realization filled her with renewed strength and courage to persist in her career choice. Similar accounts of resolution of counsellor anxiety are found in different narratives in Trotter-Matthison et al., 2010.

Study participants also referred to other feelings which accompany the resolution of anxiety: feelings of joy, a sense of awe, a “wow” feeling, a sense of accomplishment, profound satisfaction and fulfilment.

Another outcome of this research is the realization that novice counsellors are extremely enthusiastic, highly committed and most willing to work on themselves in every way possible so that they can be of service to their clients. These findings are also referred to
in literature on counsellor training and development (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992(a); Hazler & Kottler, 2005).

Participant six emphasizes that novice counsellors are counsellors learning and practicing new skills. The two counsellors without much baggage and prior experience were quick to identify setting boundaries as one of the main skills learnt during the novice phase:

“…not to take the clients’ problems at home. The profession is also about boundaries; it is important to learn how to keep boundaries… I have improved a lot.”

Hands Holding Growing Plant: Participant

Another important skill identified by participants is learning about transference and counter transference issues within the therapeutic relationships. Once mastered, this skill becomes an effective tool to use within the relationship, but this process is quite lengthy and the novice needs to be aided through personal therapy and supervision to reach the necessary level of skill and awareness that professional practice entails (Lees, 2008).

Participant three highlights the fact that “the anxious and self-aware novice is more technique oriented”, indicating that transition between the novice and expert stage is what takes the counsellor onto a different platform – that of acquiring a professional status wherein the more experienced counsellor can tailor-make specific interventions for the client rather than rely on techniques and a one-fit-for-all method. This line of thought is very near to stage two of the counsellor complexity model of Stoltenberg (1981) and to Satir’s (2001) reasoning about teaching novices how to become therapists. Such a train of thought presumes that counsellor initial stage can be likened to a ‘technician stage’ with the new and somewhat anxious trainee pacifying anxiety by adhering to instructions in executing a particular counselling technique.

The implications of this finding are that counsellor educators need to assess individual trainee development. Whilst newcomers to the field need instructions and techniques, more
advanced trainees would have integrated these techniques into their therapeutic self, insisting that a particular execution of a particular technique at a more advanced stage could in itself become a source of tension and stress.

**Beliefs and values.**

All participants traced the importance of their belief and value systems in their decisions to become counsellors. Participants one, three, five, six and seven acknowledge that such value systems were passed on to them by their family of origin or the wider family context, whilst all participants admit that the wider societal system reflected on and impacted their choice of personal values and beliefs. According to these research findings, values and beliefs can also be a by-product of some life event, e.g. loss of a significant other either through death or separation.

“Even my father’s silence affected me and my value system,” said one participant referring to a parent’s funeral and implying that, in the face of death, values and priorities shift and life becomes even more precious.

Some beliefs and values were seen as an asset which the traveller puts into his backpack whilst tracking the long distance towards the end of the counselling course. These could be beliefs about empowering others, about persistence, about personal autonomy, about openness to cultural diversity, and about values like sincerity, loyalty, solidarity with those in need.

Other values and beliefs were seen as possible sources of dilemmas. For example, a participant mentions her dilemma when assisting terminally ill clients who want to take their own life. Her value of autonomy and her belief that clients know what is best for them in their situation clashes with legal aspects and with counsellor guidelines and ethical behaviour. She notes that the stronger the belief, the more intense the dilemma becomes, and that supervision is a must in such cases. Another participant shares how her own personal
judgement regarding empowering parents through parenting skills clashes with the departmental framework and procedure guidelines in case of child neglect issues. She says that she often makes decisions based on her values and beliefs rather than adhere strictly to the guidelines, of course after conferring with her supervisor.

Participants understood the importance of working on themselves through personal therapy, self-reflection and supervision to ensure that these beliefs and values are integrated within their therapeutic self and their counselling professional identity, and so become assets rather than hindrance in the therapeutic process. They also sustain that such personal beliefs and value systems make every counsellor a unique professional and that one of the major differences between counselling and other professions surfaces when it comes to issues of congruence between personal beliefs and values and how these are reflected in the therapeutic relationship.

“I have to share this with you... I am coming to realize that we are different from say accountants and other such professionals… who we are, what we believe in is what makes us, and we are all unique” (Participant 3).

It seems that, in this research, different participants are at different stages of integrating their personal belief and value system into their counsellor identity, but nonetheless all have moved into a stage wherein they understand their uniqueness as professionals and all have experienced that personal values and beliefs play a strong part in their choice of a counselling career. These findings confirm and echo the research outcomes in the field (Auxier et al, 1983; Wright, 2005; Orlinsky & Ronnestad, 2005; Puglia 2008; Emerson, 2010) wherein belief and value systems are reported as playing an important part in counsellor development.

**Hurdles along the way.**
Participants listed a number of obstacles and setbacks along their counsellor voyage. The most common setbacks were related to the financial, time and relationship considerations.

a. Financial aspect: course fees, payment of supervision from the third year onwards and cost of a minimum of fifty hours of personal therapy.

b. Time (duration) of course, and the amount of time (in hours) spent in tuition, supervision, therapy and assignments and thesis.

c. Relationship issues, which captures both the other issues since the financial burden related to the course means that in most cases one of two partners has to increase its workload to support course expenditure, and also lack of time due to course exigencies’ impacts on intimacy and relational aspects.

Every counsellor is of course affected differently, especially in the relationship domain. One participant regretfully noted that “I have never given my fair share in helping my children with their study or homework, I feel so guilty about this.” Another one commented that, since the partner is away for long periods of time, the duration and the intensity of the course is even more pronounced and that it was affecting intimacy within the relationship to a worrying degree. Another participant had to give up a job to care for the children as it was not possible to work, take care of children and attend the course at the same time. This decision of course intensified the financial burden, with the partner having to work more to support the joint decision with the consequence of spending less time at home.

Another participant listed group dispute as a difficulty encountered during a specific time. It was immediately recognized, however, that he experienced dispute as a hurdle (the others did not mention it although they formed part of the dynamic) because it clashed with the personal belief of unity that was nurtured in his family of origin.
As a researcher and as a co-participant in the journey towards our cohort’s professional identity, I am touched by the intimate narratives of difficulties experienced along the way. I too share similar stories of hurdles and obstacles on the level experienced by the participants, and believe that the degree of sharing can in part be attributed to my subjective involvement in the research. In my opinion, being part of the same cohort I am researching contributed to the co-authoring of the narratives in this project. Moreover, the participants could have felt freer expressing themselves with someone who had walked with them during the voyage, someone who had shared, experienced and lived the same experiences.

**Acquisition of a Professional Counselling Identity**

This makes him reflect that different trainees are at different points of their learning process,

Depending on a number of factors

That include past experience, background, practice…

Until slowly the learning process becomes second nature,

an attitude,

A way of being and becoming.

Four years are just about right to

Simmer and cement together the different aspects of the course.

The Masters compared to other (counsellor) training programmes sees Theory as especially important.

The Master needs to know as well as experience... and of course integrate the components together

Along the seemingly never ending journey.
The Masters programme consolidates past learning and launches

The trainee on a professional level.

From Stanza Analysis – The Becoming

This stanza analysis brings together a lot of thoughts and reflections about the acquisition of a professional identity. This is seen as a process which incorporates together the elements of knowledge and practice acquired through a recognized training course. Past experiences incorporating other training programmes and other opportunities of practice prior to entering the course form part of the equation, as much as the duration of time to integrate the different elements together. The end product of this process leads to the acquisition of a professional status where the professional identity becomes an attitude, a way of being and becoming.

The stanza also points out that in counselling professional identity is an ongoing process. Five of the research participants agree with this statement. Participant five is not clear about this and it can be argued that this may be due to the fact that the he carries a baggage from professions which are somewhat different from counselling. It is very interesting to note that in her visual narrative this participant (five) presented herself visually as three distinct objects, an owl, balloons and clover, whilst the others represented themselves with more ‘integrated’ images,namely growth, exploration, integration, becoming and a journey.

In the case of participant five, who seems to be at a different level of integration from that of the other participants, both the verbal and visual texts consolidate each other (Riessman, 2008) and in my opinion confirm the appropriateness of the selected methodology. As a researcher, I realize that I could have easily traced some thread and found links between the different narratives of her coming together as a counsellor had she only
narrated her experience; however, the visual and verbal accounts both point to a different level of integration from that of the other research participants.

This result implies that counsellor educators need to be aware of, appreciate and allow individual development in counsellors, especially since the course is open to prospective trainees hailing from different academic orientations. Diversity in counsellor formation can considered as a richness if the necessary respect and awareness of difference are part of the formation process. I find that Bond (2009) captures the intricacies of these findings when he outlines the values and principles inherent in counsellor education and training, insisting that educators treat trainees with the same respect and dignity for diversity as they treat their clients

Results indicate that fourth year counselling students see that the acquisition of a profession depends on a number of factors which include:

1. Public perception
2. Recognition by established kindred professionals
3. The Maltese cultural context
4. The contribution and professional attitude of the first cohort of masters students.

Whilst the first two results are similar to western literature on professional counsellor acquisition (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992a, 2003; Fouad 2003; Savickas, 2003), the other two results are particular to the Maltese context in which a collective counsellor identity is in the process of being formed.

Participant four notes that the general public has a diffused and at times confused image of the counsellor. In the Maltese situation, the counsellor is sometimes confused with candidates occupying a seat in the local councils. This is confirmed by (Mifsud, 2006). Another misconception is that the counsellor is a volunteer with relatively little academic
background working in a voluntary institution. Yet another misinterpretation of the work of
the counsellor is that the counsellor works only in school settings and that the counsellor is a
school teacher who is interested in helping school children.

**Elements that contribute to professional identity formation.**

*Supervision.*

All participants rate supervision highly in terms of professional identity formation.

Supervision is seen as a ‘crutch’ that supports the novice counsellor to become an
e xpert counsellor. It is seen to be “*a sacred and safe space which permits the novice
counsellor to explore new ideas and experiment with new techniques.*” It is “*a tool that
accompanies the traveller on a life journey towards a continuous professional evolution*” and
“*offers feedback for professional growth.*” It also helps develop reflexive practice which,
according to participant two, is a hallmark of a professional status. Participant six perceives
supervision as the container that holds the emerging professional together, until such a time
that the counsellor would develop and internalize the supervisor within himself.

All participants say that supervision soothes novice anxiety and apprehension and
empowers the counsellor irrespective of the progression towards professional acquisition.
Moreover, participant one reflects that supervision transmits expert knowledge from
supervisor to supervisee. Participant four acknowledges the evolutionary dimension to
supervision which takes a different format at novice stage and at expert counselling stage
where the counsellor would have achieved a sense of professional confidence. At this stage
supervision “*accompanies rather than holds together*” the master counsellor along the
indefinite counselling journey.
Evolution of the Therapeutic self.

The evolution of the Therapeutic self is seen by all participants as complementing the development of the counselling professional identity. According to the participants, the counselling identity requires the evolution of the therapeutic self, a process where training past and present, work experience and previous background, systems of values and personal beliefs, past personal experiences are reorganised and integrate within the personality development of the counsellor.

Interestingly enough the two counsellors who spoke at length and were fully aware of the emergence of the therapeutic self are the two most experienced participants. Participant three is also developing this awareness. These findings confirm (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1995, 2003; Wosket, 1999) the theory about the evolution of the therapeutic self and the use of the therapeutic self in therapy. This literature is also amply illustrated in various therapist accounts of their own evolving therapeutic self in Matthison-Trotter et al (2010).

Participant one said that the therapeutic self is a product of self-reflexivity which emerges through the integration and linking of past and present knowledge, experiences, personal beliefs and values. It is further developed through personal therapy and the supervisory relationship. Journal writing is considered one of the tools that sharpen reflexivity and maintain the evolution of the therapeutic self.

The same participant noted that indicators of an emerging therapeutic self are:
a. A clear preference for a particular therapeutic stance that fits the particular individual.

b. An overall ability to better and to take a meta position in therapeutic interventions.

c. Learnt techniques are integrated into the personhood of the counsellor who is not merely a technician but a uniquely formed professional. Such professionals come out with interventions far more effective than the initial technical interventions that anxious novice counsellors usually undertake.

d. Knowing what to do in different situations is experienced as an intrinsic aptitude.

Participant two additionally notes how critical incidents in client interventions, once processed and adequately supervised, consolidate the ever evolving therapeutic self. She identifies herself as gaining more insight into who she is as a person as being an indicator of such a developing state. She also observes that her therapeutic self and her personality are considered as being extensions of her core self. Moreover, she recognizes the connection between a particular therapeutic stance which fits into the uniquely formed therapeutic self of the counsellor. “This is who I am and this is how I do it,” she confidently proclaims. Given her discreetness and reserved attitude, this is a very strong statement indeed.

This participant also believes that the therapeutic self and the professional self are intrinsically linked and develop symbiotically, feeding off each other and nurturing each other’s development. She noticed that her personal development served as a point of departure for changes in her professional life. For example, working on personal issues and learning how to take calculated risks were reflected both in her personal life and in her career move.
Participant three reflects on how, as an emerging professional, he is starting to locate and internalize resources within himself rather than always search for external resources (e.g. supervision, etc.). He attributes this to a simultaneously evolving therapeutic self and professional self.

Findings from this study confirm the evolution of a unique therapeutic self as one of the key factors in professional counsellor formation. This finding is also in perfect agreement with literature in this area (vide Puglia 2008; Orlinsky & Ronnestad, 2005; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003; 1992a).

**Counsellor training.**

Participants considered the counsellor training programme as contributing effectively to their professional formation. All participants were satisfied with the level of academia and practice that the course offered, although the two most new to the field suggest more opportunities for observation and live supervision to help the novice counsellor during the transition from the theory phase to the practicum.

The most salient parts of the course were grouped under the headings:

1) Knowledge Acquisition (Theory)
2) Cognitive formation
3) 600 hour practicum
4) Cohort development
5) Personal therapy
6) Supervision (referred to earlier).

**Knowledge attainment** refers to the theoretical knowledge gained during the training process. Knowledge was seen to increase through the different learning opportunities made available. Attending lectures, assignments and the research process were cited as being the
most relevant towards professional identity development. Participant one said that looking at assignments of his counselling diploma and at his latest course assignments made him realize the huge knowledge gap covered during the four years of training, and concluded that it was after all time well spent. Participants one, two, three and four observe themselves delving more deeply into the theoretical aspect and claim that re-exposure to and re-visiting of theoretical principles intensifies knowledge attainment.

**Cognitive formation** in this research project addresses the bridging of the theoretical element with the experience gained in the practicum. It is seen to be a cognitive process through which links are established between various elements in the course and where the trainee is seen to move towards the acquisition of professional formation. All participants include supervision, therapy, theory, practice, self-reflexivity and the influence of the cohort under cognitive formation. Participants agree that cognitive formation is an integral part of professional identity acquisition and the formation of the therapeutic self.

**600 hour practicum.**

He later explains the importance of launching oneself into practice Irrespective of anxiety and self doubt Questions like “Am I prepared enough?” or “Will I harm my client?” are legitimate anxieties he feels Using the metaphor of a bird stretching his wings for the first time and falling onto a soft bed, flying back and trying again and again until it succeeds.
He says that the flight and fall both
Helped the bird to strengthen his wings and gain experience.
Likewise, experience is gained through practicing theory
And linking these two core elements together.

From stanza analysis – Participant 3 – The integration

The above stanza analysis clearly depicts and condenses the experience of the course participants in relation to their practicum hours.

In the research there was a consensus by all participants about the importance of the practicum within the masters’ programme, most especially in the process of linking therapy to practice in the novice stage. The first client is remembered by all as a “landmark” experience, irrespective of how long before this encounter occurred.

Participants three, four and five explained how they tried their best to open up their placement opportunities to cover as wide a population as possible. They are aware that practice consolidates their learning and transforms novice counsellors into more experienced counsellors. Participant three also acknowledged that he is developing a preferred therapeutic style and a preference for working with young people as a result of the practicum experience

As discussed previously, every participant acknowledged the importance of support through supervision and personal therapy in conjunction with the practice placement. Three participants, three, five and six, lay stress on observation as a pre-requisite to practice. They recommend that future training programmes would include compulsory observation hours prior to commencing therapy. It would also be useful to compliment supervision with live supervision sessions to ensure that the process of gaining experience and integrating theory
with practice moves on as smoothly as possible. According to participants five and six, both novice counsellors and clients are seen to gain from this added support provided by peers and live supervision sessions.

The findings about the importance of placement and practice in counsellor training is amply found in literature. Trotter-Matthison et al., (2010) provide numerous narratives from the field of counselling that are in accordance with the findings of this research. The importance of counsellor narratives which voice out the feelings and experiences of counsellors in formation are extremely important to ensure constant and appropriate updates in counsellor formation programs.

**Cohort development.** All participants experienced the group as helping to reinforce their professional identity development. The group consolidated their sense of identity, reinforced their learning and provided an arena where they could feel as “counsellors in formation”. The modules of group counselling and sensitivity training, together with group supervision, were mentioned as structures wherein they experienced a sense of an emerging collective professional identity. Socializing and attending lectures were also experienced as opportunities to reinforce the personal/collective counselling professional identity formation process.

**Personal therapy** is identified by participants as helping the novice counsellor reflect, integrate and develop skills across professional/collective/therapeutic identification. According to participant six, working on own issues to sharpen self-awareness puts the counsellor on a professional level. Participant one stresses the aspect of uniqueness in the professional formation of counsellors and argues that within the training programme trainees use therapy differently according to their personal needs. Four of the six participants said
that they had been in therapy at some point in their lives prior to the counselling programme.
and one participant feels that therapy should be a pre-requisite to entering the course.

The Maltese Cultural Context

Participants note the influence of the Maltese cultural context on the acquisition of a professional identity. Participant one refers to the “island mentality” and the concept of “ta’ ġewwa u ta’ barra” (which translates as “insider and outsider”) where Maltese people are seen to create situations which bring about unnecessary competition and division such as in local village parishes where there is more than one festa and more than one band club per festa which are hosted by different committees who want to be the best and who want to have better fireworks and better decorations than the other parishioners of the same village. Politics is also a source of competition and division, as is sport both on a local and foreign level. Within this cultural context, counselling is seen to be competing with other already established professions.

Participants one, three and five feel that kindred professionals are still unsure about the ‘unique’ contribution that the counselling profession can give and fear that the profession might invoke a sense of competition for established professionals in the local job market, whilst participants two, three and six are aware of the possibility and the possible implications of kindred rivalry but do not feel that it affects the professionals that they are working with in their teams/workplace setting.

Participant two notes that school counselling seems to be more established and more readily recognized by other professionals in the local setting than community counselling (which is the domain of social workers and psychologists) and health counselling, (which is typically the domain of health, counselling and clinical psychologists).
Participant one goes as far as perceiving the course itself as bringing kindred professions together. According to this participant, the fact that these professionals have been recruited to teach on the Masters course helps to dissolve any misconceptions, fear and dread. He says that it seems that the pendulum has shifted from the position of near hostility to felt acceptance, and that it should soon settle in the middle with counselling being accepted as a profession.

Another point raised by most participants is that the acquisition of professional identity is seen to depend on how the first Masters in counselling graduates will launch themselves into the local scene. Participant five observes that one single unethical or unprofessional behaviour by one counsellor qualified at Masters level could jeopardise the whole profession. The participant notes that such is not the case in other established professions and, giving the example of medical doctors, says that if a doctor were to act unethically towards a patient this does not automatically impair the collective image of medical profession.

I found no literature that reverberates the intensity of preoccupation expressed by the participants in the study. Being part of the same cohort, I too share such thoughts and can understand perfectly the brunt of the responsibility that the participants are referring to. I wonder whether this preoccupation will be shared by the next cohort of students who would find some ready ground made up for them through the first cohort.

There is little reference to literature about cultural diversity in the development of Masters in counselling students. In a study by Nelson and Jackson (2003), relationships, accomplishment, costs and perceptions of the counselling profession were found to be unique for Hispanic Masters in counselling students. Gali Cinamon and Hellman (2004) did not report any specific cultural issues in their study of Israeli counsellors, although they insist that Israeli counsellors are very conscientious and very strict about lifelong supervisory
practice, implying ‘being conscientious’ as a particular characteristic in the development of Israeli counsellors. Du Preez (2005) elaborates on how the counselling profession came to be in South Africa and explains the different modalities of training available for South African counsellors, but does not note any particular differences in the formation of these counsellors. She adds that Africa, being so big and so diverse, has no problems in absorbing different and diverse kindred professions, and reports no difficulty in the warranting of counselling professionals in the South African scene.

It would be interesting to see how ‘little Malta’ is going to absorb this new injection of locally trained Masters counsellors, and how the general public and kindred professions and professionals will react to this new reality.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The Becoming

“The circles are different narratives that characterize both my personal and professional self. It is as if over time they came together to generate a greater narrative – that of myself as a counsellor.”

“Each whole is complete and has a pattern of its own.”

Self-Analysis of Visual Text  Participant One – Becoming
The visual text of participant one was chosen to illustrate the concluding chapter. Just as the participant identified different and distinctly formed parts of the self coming together in the making of a professional counsellor, likewise literature, results and discussion come together to form this dissertation project. This chapter brings together the contents of this research project, revisits the research questions and offers suggestions for future counsellor training programmes.

Results from this research amply sustain literature on the journey that counsellors undergo in their professional formation: past experiences, counsellor training, the formation and integration of a unique reflexive therapeutic self, the work with clients, supervision, forming part of a counselling community in a particular cultural context together with continuous professional upgrading outline, and delineate the acquisition of a professional counsellor identity.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research studies form part of this chapter.
The construction of knowledge through narrative

The creation of knowledge in this Masters’ thesis was a process of collaboration between myself as a researcher and research participants, a multi-level and dynamic process of reflective thought between both parties and the data generated which informed decisions, actions and interpretations in the different stages of the process.

Stories of counsellor identity formation were gathered in a variety of creative ways which included both visual and narrated texts. The narrated texts were analysed in two ways: poetic stanza analysis and thematic analysis – two methods that are accepted in narrative methodology. The visual texts were supported by the participants’ own interpretations and amalgamated into the narrated text.

Throughout the process I acknowledged my subjective involvement. Being part of the same cohort I was investigating was multi-faceted. Notwithstanding all precautions that were taken, it might have coloured to a degree my perception of the data, but it was mostly perceived as an added source of richness in the co-authoring of the narratives of counsellor identity formation.

Summary of Research Findings

As outlined in the Introduction chapter, the aim of the research was to provide a context wherein the narrative of the acquisition of a professional counsellor identity of the first cohort of Masters in counselling students in Malta could be explored. This aim was achieved both through narrated text and visual texts which were then analysed as outlined in the methodology section.

Although due to ethical considerations only two poetic stanza analysis are fully published in this document, the narratives that emerged portrayed the uniqueness in
counsellor formation and the complexity of the process which were echoed in the other ‘unpublished’ poetic stanzas.

Research findings offer enough ground to claim that counsellors who entered the Masters in counselling course equipped with prior academic training and experience related to the field seem to be at a different and somewhat more advanced stage of their professional development. This finding was well demonstrated throughout the narrated text and the visual representation which point towards a complex and recursive process of integration, personal and professional development, which is conformity with current available literature in the field (e.g Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, 2003; Orlinsky and Ronnestad 2005).

Participants one and two seem to be at a more advanced stage of their professional formation, having integrated theory with practice within their own therapeutic self. Both these participants have developed a preference for a particular therapeutic style and are confident and comfortable in their preference. They are both aware of and both acknowledge that their previous academic background and experience has contributed to their professional maturity.

The other four participants are at different stages of entering the advanced student stage (Skovholt & Ronnestad 1992(a), 2003). Participants three and four were initially at an advantage over the other two participants having had a clear understanding of theory prior to joining the Masters course, but this advantage seems to have ironed itself out around the third year as the other two students started to catch up in this understanding. These four participants entered practice with the same level of training and struggled with resolving issues around novice anxiety in the early stages of their placement. They recommend observation and live supervision as tools to link the theoretical component of the course with practice.
In support with Jennings et al (2003) and Martin et al (1989), there is not enough evidence to indicate a gradual relationship between counsellor developmental stages and level of expertise in the execution of therapy within the counselling process. This might be a good topic to take up for further research.

Participants with the least experience encountered difficulty in managing the six hundred hours of required placements since they were not working in the area for most of the four years and felt at a disadvantage when compared to the first two participants who were doing their placement during their working hours. It is recommended that future courses include observation and live supervision in the practicum hours.

The visual text indicates that personality might be a factor that demonstrates how counsellors at approximately the same level of professional formation perceive themselves in spite of their personal competencies and developmental stage, the most stark example being that of participants one and two. Notwithstanding her academic formation and experience, participant two perceived of herself as a curious toddler climbing a staircase whilst participant one who has a similar portfolio manifested himself with a complex, intricate design and continued to display his confidence through his own interpretation of the visual text.

This study also confirms the relationship between narrative and identity formation (Clandmin & Connelly, 2000) and the role of the counsellor in claiming professional identity (Orlinsky & Ronnestad, 2005). Participant four could embrace her new-found counselling identity after she narrated her counselling story.

**Cultural considerations**

As referred in previous chapters, counselling is not currently a warranted profession in Malta. The preoccupation of the first cohort of students at Masters level in this regard was felt throughout the narrated accounts.
Participants were affected to different degrees regarding the public recognition of the profession by the issue of a professional warrant. These participants are at an uncomfortable position in that they are being prepared for a profession that is yet unwarranted. There is a clear dissonance between their maturity as professionals and their recognition as professionals in the field.

I could not find any similar literature in the area, and the situation of Maltese counsellors might be a unique one in the European continent and possibly in the Western world. However, in the Maltese cultural context this is quite a common problem and kindred professions have undergone similar frustration prior to recognition; consequently, the element of hope is quite high amongst the participants. They hope and trust that recognition is not too far away.

It is noted that in this context professional acquisition is a separate process from recognition of the profession and warranting, and it is likewise observed that course participants have acquired or are in an advanced stage of acquiring a professional counselling identity independent and irrespective of the public declaration that defines the establishment and recognition of the counselling profession.

The same can be said about the collective professional counsellor identity of Maltese counsellors which has been seen to develop rapidly in the last few years, possibly because of the popularity of the course and the amount of students that have joined the Masters in counselling courses in the last five years.

**Counselling educators and professional identity**

Latest research (Lanman, 2011; Emerson, 2010 & Pugia 2008) informs on the strong influence of counsellor educators on the professional identity formation of Masters in counselling students. There is an indication that course participants have modelled their
professional identity on the image of the course co-ordinator, their supervisor and personal therapist, but results are inconclusive and this subject merits a research project in itself. It would be interesting to carry out a longitudinal study that measures the personal and collective formation of Maltese counsellors as emerging cohorts of counsellors eventually take up an educator role.

Implications of the Study

1. The first implication is that a professional counselling identity evolves over time and is a product of theory and practice welded within a unique therapeutic self. Development is further guided by supervision and personal therapy. Training programmes that lead the student towards professional development need to meet stringent criteria which ensure that these requirements are met. This measure safeguards the profession and the well-being of clients. The Masters in counselling course that the participants followed is a course that has the requisites that meet these criteria.

2. A collective counsellor identity, although not essential for the acquisition of a personal professional identity, facilitates it. Literature points towards a relationship between a strong collective counselling identity and work opportunities in the area of counselling.

3. Counsellor development is a cumulative process which incorporates past personal and professional experience and prior academic achievement. The study highlighted that different categories of students were at different thresholds of their professional development. The implication of this finding is that counsellor educators need to assess students individually and understand that, whilst newcomers to the field need instructions and techniques, more advanced trainees would have integrated these
techniques within their therapeutic self. Insisting on a particular technique at an advanced stage of development could create unwanted stress and tension.

4. Study participants experienced a dissonance between their evolving professional self and the recognition of the profession in Malta. This study clearly illustrates that a professional counselling identity develops irrespective of a recognised professional status, and that clients of counsellors are receiving a professional service notwithstanding this legislative lacuna.

5. Research findings and literature agree that the practicum takes the novice trainee to the next level.

**Recommendations**

It was noted that this research benefited all participants who, through a process of narrating and visualising their counselling journey, moved a step nearer towards the integration of their counselling identity. It is highly recommended that the course includes opportunities for such reflection and that a module is dedicated for a project about personal and collective identity formation. It is most likely that invoking and nurturing a collective counselling identity in training programmes would enhance the profession.

The creation of a counselling awareness week, drafted along the lines of the ACA counselling awareness campaign in April of each year, would serve the dual purpose of informing the public and establishing counselling as a profession needed in different settings.

All research participants advocated observation as a compulsory step prior to practicum experience and recommend live supervision to aid the transition from theory to practice. Participants three, four, five and six were adamant that learning by observing safeguards clients and alleviates novice anxiety. It is recommended that future cohorts benefit from opportunities of observing counsellors and that a few live supervision sessions are incorporated within the course structure to consolidate learning. One might also consider
deducting observation sessions from the six hundred placement hours so as not to extend the
duration of the course.

Four participants proposed the opportunity of specialization in a particular therapeutic style. It was suggested that the module of therapeutic approaches be offered as an introductory module in the third semester, and that students are offered the opportunity to specialize in a particular approach in their second or third year of studies.

Opportunities for continuous professional development are also advocated. Further post-masters training is awaited by four out of the six participants.

Suggestions for future research

1. A study about the professional identity of counsellor educators.
2. Gender differences in professional identity formation.
3. A study of how counsellors develop clinical self confidence in their first year of client contact.
4. A case study of the first client assigned to a novice counsellor.
5. A longitudinal study of the development of master counsellors.
6. The general public’s perception of counsellors in the Maltese islands.

Limitations of research

I recognize that the position of participant researcher is a multi-faceted one. Notwithstanding all precautions listed in the methodology section, I am sure that it has coloured my perception to some degree.
Throughout the study it was evident that the process of counsellor identity formation is a complex, recursive and dynamic one. This study could have included the views of counsellor educators to include some other perspective in the equation.

This study is about a particular group of students in a particular cultural context. Findings cannot therefore be generalized to apply to all counsellor trainees in the process of acquiring their professional identity.
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Appendix A – Invitation to Participate in Research.

Silvia Galea  
Winter Jasmine,  
Bishop Gargallo Street,  
Hal Ghardur GHR 1351  
Mobile No 99894849  
E-mail: silvia.galea@gmail.com

Date: 2nd August, 2011.

Dear

Re: Stepping out of the Mould? – A qualitative inquiry into the development of counsellor identity of the first cohort of Masters in Counselling Students.

Your name has been selected at random from amongst other peers to participate in my research regarding the formation of Professional Identity of Masters in counselling Students.

If you agree to participate in this research you will be expected to participate in a tape recorded interview and to sign the necessary consent forms. The interview is not expected to take up more than an hour.

Kindly sign and return the attached form in the self-addressed envelope indicating your intention to participate or decline invitation.

Thank you,

Kind regards,

Silvia Galea
Dear Silvia,

I…………………………………intend to participate/not to participate in the above mentioned research project.

Signature_____________________

Date         ____________________
Appendix B – Consent Form

Silvia Galea
Winter Jasmine,
Bishop Gargallo Street,
Hal Gharghrur GHR 1351
Mobile No 99894849
E-mail: silvia.galea@gmail.com

Stepping out of the Mould? – A qualitative inquiry into the development of counsellor identity of the first cohort of Masters in counselling students in Malta.

Consent Form - Interview

I _______________________________________ agree to give Silvia Galea permission to tape record the interview regarding the emergence of Professional Identity of Counsellors as part of her Mastres in counselling Dissertation.

I am aware that the interviews will be transcribed by a professional transcriber and analysed by poetic stanza analysis and thematic analysis.

I will also be producing a visual text to complement the narrative interview.

Signature ______________________________
Date ________________

Researcher’s Statement.

1. I, Silvia Galea, agree to try my utmost to protect the autonomy of the research participants and to seek continuous feedback and approval regarding the presentation of data.
2. I agree to provide the equipment necessary to tape record the interview. The tapes will not be used for any other purpose without your written consent. If you would like a copy of your interview I would be happy to provide you with one.
3. Once the data collection stage of the project is completed I shall organize a feedback session for all involved.
Supervisor’s Statement

I, Anne Stokes, as supervisor of this dissertation agree to ensure that the terms and conditions stated in this consent form will be adhered to.

Signature___________________
Date _________________

Signature___________________
Date _________________
Appendix C

Stepping out of the Mould? – A qualitative inquiry into the development of counsellor identity of the first cohort of Masters in counselling students in Malta.

Semi-structured questionnaire

*The questions are intended to prompt and open up and stimulate a discussion on the acquisition of professional development. The last three questions (in italics) were added after the pilot interview.*

- How did you decide to enter the profession?
- What was your initial conceptualization of the term counsellor and how has this changed?
- What in your opinion are the most important personal attributes that an aspiring Masters in counselling student should possess?
- What importance do you attribute to personal therapy and supervision in your professional formation?
- What importance do you attribute to practice in your professional formation?
- How does the educational aspect influence professional formation?
- Do you conceive of yourself as a counsellor? When has this process started? Can you trace/describe it? Can you describe your emotions and feelings at different parts of the course?
- Can you identify any personal/professional dilemmas along the way?
- Do you see counselling as firmly established in your setting?
- Have you seen an evolving identity of counselling and the role of counsellor in your setting? How is this affecting you?
- Can you identify other struggles: e.g. financial, licensing, etc
- Do you belong/participate in counsellor organizations?
- Have there been any significant changes in your personal/professional life since you started the course?
• What about personal beliefs and professional development? Can you identify any connection between these two factors?

• Do you anticipate that the next cohort of Masters in counselling students will undergo the same journey of professional development? Will anything be different for this cohort or for the following cohort?

• What do you think will consolidate the counselling profession in Malta?

• What else comes to mind in relation to the acquisition of professional identity?

• What are your plans for the future (school, changing employment/private practice)

• Now that you are in your final semester what are your thoughts and feelings?

• What does it mean to you to begin this transition from student to counsellor?

• What experiences have contributed to your identity of counsellor?
Appendix D: Visual Text Participant One

**Becoming**

![Image of a colorful, circular pattern]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of object</th>
<th>Feelings identified</th>
<th>Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A kind of a funnel made of circles, of different colours that give motion to the pattern formed</td>
<td>The feeling is one of uncertainty and generativity at the same time.</td>
<td>The circles are different narratives that characterize both my personal and professional self. It is as if over time they came together to generate a greater narrative – that of my self as a counsellor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The movement – the drawing gives the</td>
<td>The feeling is that of coming together, a process</td>
<td>Things that have an identity of their own come together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impression that there is a kind of a centrifugal force, pulling things towards the centre.</td>
<td>Of becoming. A feeling of tension and healthy anxiety while stretching towards the future.</td>
<td>In a meaningful way. However the fluidity remains. During my years of training and practice as a counsellor, I reflected a lot on different aspects of my life and different experiences, coming to an identity which is always in the making.</td>
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<tr>
<td>---</td>
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<tr>
<td>The movement is also outwards, not only centrifugal.</td>
<td>It is as if the present experience as a counsellor leads me to re-read my earlier experiences in a particular way. Recently I saw a video of Steve Jobs (Apple) giving a speech at a graduation ceremony where he speaks of retrospectively joining different life events in the light of his present situation. The feeling is mainly that of accomplishment or of coherence. I feel ok about my past and feel it integrates well with my present.</td>
<td>My present understanding of counselling and being a counsellor influences my way of viewing my past experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The core is dark and seems to expand if you focus on the centre of the drawing.</td>
<td>It is a bit scary, accentuates the feel of uncertainty, which is not always comfortable to stay with, even if I believe it is a necessary state.</td>
<td>What lies ahead of me is unknown. It is true that I see a great value in maintaining a not-knowing position in counselling yet at times it is hard to live with. Personal reflection, peer consultation and supervision helps, but even the nicest of experiences can be tiring and mentally and emotionally and physically exhausting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each whole has a pattern of its own</td>
<td>The complexity along with the uncertainty leaves me with a sense of awe. At the same time a sense of finitude is accentuated.</td>
<td>It is amazing how complex lives are. This makes me adopt a position of respect and awe with every client I meet. I know that what is being shared is just a drop in an ocean. Therefore I must approach each client with great humility and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The colours remind me of the rainbow, which is always a celebration to see.</td>
<td>The feeling I get whenever I see a rainbow is of great excitement, I am appreciative of life in general. Usually those colours remind me of the givens I have in my life. Which at times I take for granted but appreciate in such moments.</td>
<td>I would like to maintain that same childlike enthusiasm in my counselling profession because it is the soul and heart of each encounter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Visual Text: Participant Four**

**Blue Bottles**

*This is a photo I took while on holiday. Looking back at it, it inspired me with regards to my journey as a counsellor.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of object</th>
<th>Feelings identified</th>
<th>Reflections (regarding the drawing and my development as a counsellor)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue bottles</td>
<td>Calm, energetic, pleasant</td>
<td>The different sized bottles resemble the various phases in my becoming a counsellor, be it my past in school as the ‘student who helped others’, what I feel is a natural disposition towards such a career etc. They also resemble the different facets which ‘becoming a counsellor’ took and is still taking. Thinking back about the course, the various bottles seem to resemble the various challenges we had to go through – some looked harder than they actually were. Now, it is easier to say, ‘We (as in a group) have been...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bent bottles</td>
<td>Frustration, anxiety, discouragement, doubtful, questioning</td>
<td>There were times during the course when I questioned my taking up such an extensive course due to difficulties which arose or due to things which were unexpected but expected of us to complete the course. There were also a number of times when I felt (maybe even at present when I am going through some stressful times) that other things should be a priority in my life, and not the course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay shoes with little plants</td>
<td>Serene, optimistic, comfortable.</td>
<td>The clay shoes resemble the knowledge that the counselling journey is indeed a ‘journey’. I started my journey in the past and am currently continuing it. Hopefully the future of this journey will be a ‘flowering’ one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big vase with plant</td>
<td>Satisfied yet cautious</td>
<td>The vase represents in a way a more thorough feeling of wholeness. My journey in becoming a counsellor will obviously not stop when the course does. I see it a continuous learning experience. Yet admittedly, gaining the Masters will signify a lot. There are also feelings of cautiousness associated for the simple reason that I feel that I will never know enough and will hopefully never stop acquiring skills and knowledge through reading, CPD, help through professionals such as my supervisor but most importantly through clients themselves.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>