Agency in Young Clients' Narratives of Counseling: "It's Whatever You Want to Make of It"

Kerry Gibson and Claire Cartwright
University of Auckland

Although there is a growing body of research that looks at how adult clients are active agents in their own counseling, there is little similar research that looks at the experiences of young people in counseling. This research explores how client agency is constructed in retrospective accounts of a school counseling experience provided by 22 young people (aged 16–18). The narrative analysis shows how participants constructed their agency as clients in a number of different ways: in asserting their choice over whether to see a counselor; in their evaluations of counselors; in the selection or rejection of aspects of counseling and by portraying themselves as primarily responsible for the benefits obtained from counseling. In these ways, young clients seemed able to shape their construction of counseling to better match their own priorities. But participants also seemed aware of potential threats to their ability to exercise their agency and described how they struggled to express their needs overtly to their counselors. This raises the possibility that young people's assertions of agency may be best understood in the context of their relative powerlessness in counseling situations. Although there is potential to harness young clients' agency in the service of better counseling outcomes, their strong commitment to a view of themselves as agents may result in them experiencing greater accountability without a corresponding access to power in counseling.

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There has long been recognition of the importance of "client factors" in accounting for good outcomes in counseling (Clarkin & Levy, 2004). A growing body of research within this field points to the value of understanding how clients use their counseling experiences to meet their own needs. This research suggests that instead of simply following a counselor-led process, clients may actively pursue an agenda of their own. As Bohart (2000) puts it: "clients are active agents who operate on therapist input and modify it and use it to achieve their own ends" (p. 132). This can include developing unique and creative outcomes for themselves, some of which the counselor may not even be aware (Bohart & Tallman, 1999; Duncan & Miller, 2000; Levitt, Butler, & Hill, 2006; Rennie, 2001). Researchers in this area argue that what has been called "client agency" works to enhance the effects of counseling. Clients have been said to actively seek out what they need from counseling and work to integrate their counseling experience into their lives outside of therapy (Bohart & Tallman, 1999). Research has also suggested that clients enter counseling with a clear idea of what they want and help to steer their counselor toward interventions that are helpful for them (Rennie, 2000). Recent research suggests that clients consciously recognize and value their own agency in counseling. They see their motivation as central to the change process, believe they are actively working toward change, and feel a sense of accomplishment in their own work within therapy (Hoener, Stiles, Luka, & Gordon, 2012).

Perhaps in an attempt to correct for the underrecognition of clients' contributions to counseling in dominant medicalized representations of psychotherapy (Wampold, Ahn, & Coleman, 2001), researchers have tended to focus largely on the benefits of client agency for counseling. Agency has been described as being both essential to the effective engagement of clients in counseling as well as a desirable outcome of counseling itself (Jenkins, 1997; Williams & Levitt, 2007). Duncan and Miller (2000) personify client agency in the romantic notion of the "heroic client." But the appeal of this kind of representation of client agency needs to be tempered with a degree of caution. Even Bohart and Tallman (1999), who promote a positive view of client agency, noted that there may be a variety of life circumstances that could prevent a client from experiencing agency in counseling. Some of these circumstances may be in the client's life outside of counseling, but there may also be constraints within the counseling relationship itself that prevent clients from experiencing or exercising agency effectively. Rennie's (1994a) research shows that although clients were active in appraising their therapists, their ability to voice their own opinions in counseling were tempered by a fear of criticizing their therapist, concerns about the therapist's self-esteem, the need to be a good client, and a feeling of indebtedness to the therapist. This research suggests powerful pressures in the counseling relationship that could work against

client agency. As Rennie put it: "The role of being a patient is to acquiesce to treatment, not to question it" (p. 433).

Furthermore, it is possible that client agency does not always foster greater engagement with the process of counseling especially when clients have views that contradict those of the counselor. The notion of "resistance" has often been used to criticize those actions of the client that do not coincide with the interests of the counselor (Beutler, Moleiro, & Talebi, 2002). Proponents of client agency would argue that resistance can be dealt with from a position that still acknowledges client agency (Williams & Levitt, 2007). However, it is important to recognize that sometimes the exercise of agency may produce disengagement rather than engagement with counseling (Frankel & Levitt, 2009; Rennie, 1994b; Stringer, Levitt, Berman, & Mathews, 2010). The existing literature suggests that although the concept of client agency seems to be an important one, there is still something to be understood about its potentials and limitations within the context of counseling.

Research that addresses the agency of the client in counseling has focused almost exclusively on adult clients and, as Duncan, Miller, and Sparks (2007) argued, little attention has been paid to the experiences of young people in counseling and how they might also be active agents in this process. Historically, this may be a product of beliefs that young people are less able to make appropriate decisions or comment authoritatively on their experiences of counseling (Prout, 2007; Zirkelback & Reese, 2010). Within the relatively small body of research that considers young people's views of counseling, there are findings that suggest that an experience of agency might be important for this group, although this concept is not named specifically. Some researchers, for example, have found that young clients were very sensitive to power issues, unwilling to be patronized, wanted an egalitarian relationship with their counselor, and wanted to be more involved in decisions about their care (Bury, Raval, & Lyon, 2007; Everall & Paulson, 2002; Freake, Barley, & Kent, 2007). A recent qualitative study pointed to the particular importance for young people of having a counselor who respected the client's independence and autonomy (Binder, Moltu, Hummelsund, Sagen, & Holgersen, 2011). These findings are consistent with developmental literature that positions young people as uniquely motivated by these kinds of concerns (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Yet in spite of arguments that counseling should be specifically adapted to young people's need for autonomy (Sauter, Heyne, & Westenberg, 2009), they are more likely than adults to experience limited control over whether and how they receive psychological help and may find themselves inserted into an institutional context dominated by the agendas of adult professionals (Karver, Handeslman, Fields, & Bickman, 2005). The potential for a mismatch between young people's priorities and those of the adults around them may go some way toward explaining why young people are notoriously difficult to engage in therapy and often have high dropout rates (Block & Greeno, 2011).

Using the model of adults as agents within counseling, it may be useful to explore whether adolescents also perceive themselves as active agents in counseling and, if so, how they envisage this agency within the constraints of a potentially less powerful position.

Understanding Agency

Agency can be defined simply as the ability to act on one's wishes and intentions (Bandura, 2006). In addition to the ability to act, agency may also involve deliberation and judgment on the basis of past experience as well as the ability to creatively envisage future possibilities (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). But although a practical definition of *agency* seems relatively easy to distill, the concept is a highly abstract one that has been subject to considerable debate. In its origins, agency has been aligned with romantic notions of free will and represented as a natural, internal capacity of a person (Ahearn, 2001). A humanistic understanding of agency has some things in common with this view, recognizing an intrinsic capacity to develop one's own potential (Rogers, 1951). Following this tradition, Jenkins (2001) elaborates what he calls "psychological agency" (p. 351). He argues that agency, which he sees as the ability to imagine alternatives and to imbue events with different meanings, is a basic human capacity that transcends the limitations of context.

However, other theorists have argued that it is important to recognize how agency is developed in interaction with, and constrained by, the social environment. From a social constructionist view, agency is understood as an amalgam of an individual's ability to make aspects of his or her identity and the social structures and cultural resources that both allow and constrain the potential to do this (Bruner, 1990). Thus, a young person's ability to construct agency for his- or herself, may, for example, depend on the extent to which society allows or expects them to exercise control over his or her own life and the power accorded to the individual in the social institutions within which they operate. Furthermore, for social constructionists, agency is not only subject to social influences; the concept of agency itself can be seen as a social construction tied to broader social discourses about individuality, freedom, and choice. Under neoliberalism, which has seen increasing globalization and the breakdown of traditional authority, dominant discourses promote ideas about individual accountability and free choice that are consistent with the concept of agency (Giddens, 1991). These discourses subtly constrain the kinds of alternatives that can be imagined by any individual. But although these kinds of social resources may provide the building blocks for what a person experiences as his or her own agency, it is also recognized that people can continue to creatively exercise agency in ways that challenge or re-create social possibilities (Bruner, 1990). From a social constructionist perspective, agency is constrained or allowed by society, but it is also experienced, reimagined, and enacted by individuals in ways that have real significance for their lives.

Empowerment is sometimes thought to be an automatic corollary of agency. Bandura (2006), for example, wrote about the way that agency allows people "the power to shape their own circumstances and the course of their lives" (p. 164). In a counseling situation, this implies that agency would allow clients access to power in directing counseling to serve their own interests, and they may also benefit from that empowerment in their lives outside of counseling (Williams & Levitt, 2007). But a social reading of agency suggests that the relationship between power and agency may be more complicated. Whether someone can experience agency may depend on social discourses and institutions. But more than this, a felt sense of agency may or may not translate into the

ability to act as an agent. This will also depend on social constraints (Giddens, 1984). Furthermore, when understood in a broader social context, the individual's ability to act as an agent may not necessarily translate into empowerment. It has been argued that although agency can potentially be liberating, discourses that emphasize this can also be seen as part of the way that society regulates people's behavior (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Sharland (2006) elaborated this idea in relation to young people, showing how discourses that highlight individual choice may produce an unwarranted sense of individual accountability that sometimes disguises a lack of power. As she put it: "Young people are structurally denied opportunity to become stakeholders in the adult world, but encouraged by the culture of individualism to believe themselves accountable (p. 254).

This socially contextualized conception of agency may be helpful in extending the humanistic use of the concept in client research. For the purpose of this research, agency is understood as the capacity of the young client to construct themselves as active in counseling within the context of the constraints of the social arrangements and expectations that frame this experience.

This study is based on accounts of an experience of school counseling given by 22 young clients. In the present article, we discuss one of the key ideas that emerged from a broader narrative analysis of the data and focus specifically on the way that young people construct themselves as being able to experience and exercise agency in counseling situations.

Methodology

In our research, we used a narrative methodology to explore young clients' retrospective narratives of their experience of counseling. Narrative research has been receiving increasing attention as a way of developing a wholistic understanding of how experiences are given meaning in the context of people's lives and also how these link to the broader social environment that they inhabit (Bruner, 1990). It has a strong tradition in social science research generally (Riessman, 2008; Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2008) and is increasingly being used in psychotherapy research in a variety of ways (Adler, Skalina, & McAdams, 2008; Angus & Greenberg, 2011; Valkonen, Hänninen, & Lindfors, 2011).

A narrative approach sees people as storytelling creatures who draw from social and cultural resources to structure their lives into meaningful accounts that help to make sense of important experiences (Crossley, 2000; Squire, 2008). In the process of talking about an experience, people are also understood to fashion aspects of their own identity—such as agency—rather than simply possessing these as internal properties (McAdams, 1993; McLoed, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1991; Stephens, 2011). Thus in this research, participants' retrospective constructions of their experience of counseling are treated not as an accurate memory of how the client *was* in counseling, but are instead seen as the way a client actively makes sense of counseling and his or her role within it. These narrative constructions of experience have been recognized as significant in framing the client's response to counseling (Valkonen et al., 2011).

This method was chosen partly because we did not wish to repeat the tendency in research to fit the client into the professionals' (or researchers') agendas. Our initial research question was an open one that asked: How do young people construct their experience of counseling? In asking this question, we hoped to find out how young clients made sense of their experiences of counseling and whether this would be similar or different to the way that the professional literature constructs counseling. Client agency emerged as a salient theoretical concept from the initial analytic reading of the narratives that participants told about their counseling experience.

The Research Setting

In New Zealand, where this research was conducted, high schools cater to young people from the age of about 13 to 18 and, although this is not legislated, schools that can afford it often provide onsite counseling to their students. Students can make an appointment directly themselves or can be referred to counseling by a friend, a teacher, or other professional. Counselors who work in these settings are usually trained in a range of models, including humanistic, cognitive behavioral therapy, and narrative approaches and draw on these as needed.

The Participants

The participants were seven young men and 15 young women who were between 16 and 18 years old and who had used the school counseling services at two high schools that catered largely to middle-class families. Most participants identified as New Zealanders of European ancestry (11), several described themselves as immigrants from other English-speaking countries (six), and five identified as Māori and/or Pacifika.

All participants had had a counseling experience in the previous 18 months. Twelve participants said they had had over 20 sessions of counseling, seven participants had had five to 19 sessions, and three participants had had fewer than five sessions. Although we had initially requested that participants speak to us at the conclusion of their counseling sessions, it appeared that many participants (10) considered themselves to be in some kind of continuous relationship with their counselor even if they had stopped for some time. The length of time since they had seen the counselor ranged from "yesterday" to 1.5 years previous to the interview. It is worth noting, however, that as participants described their experience of counseling in narrative form, they often contradicted some of the details they had provided in an initial questionnaire that asked them basic demographic information as well as information about how many sessions of counseling they had been to and how long ago they had attended. This highlights the provisional nature of even such supposedly "factual" data within a narrative framework.

It also became clear during the interviews that many participants had in fact seen more than one counselor within the school and a number had been to counseling outside of the school context as well. They provided narratives that interlinked these experiences to the point that it was not possible to focus only on a single episode of school counseling, and we decided to accept that these were part of how school counseling was being constructed by the participants.

All participants who might have been eligible to take part in the study were contacted initially by the school counseling service at each school, and those interested in getting further information were asked to contact the researcher directly.

The Researchers

The two researchers are psychologists who are based at a university. Both, however, have experience working as therapists, sometimes with young people. Our position outside of the school context and being from a different discipline gave us some valuable distance from the material we were engaging with. However, we remain steeped in a tradition in which professionals are seen to "know best." The challenge in this research was to resist the temptation to take up a professional position in relation to the participants and their accounts, which could limit our ability to understand how clients might construct things differently to us. In particular, we wanted to avoid pathologizing the participants' views or interpreting them as a kind of "defensiveness." We recognize, however, that we cannot simply step outside of our professional identities and that these were present in the interview process (which in some way mimicked the counseling situation) and in our analysis of the data. We did, however, attempt to sustain a challenging and critical approach to our own assumptions during the process of conducting the research.

Data Gathering

Interviews were held at school to facilitate ease of access for participants. These were held in a room that was not visible to the counselors who worked there in order to protect the anonymity of those participating in the research.

In keeping with narrative interview methods (Riessman, 2008), interviews were conducted in as open-ended a way as possible in order to allow participants to structure their account as they wished. We prepared participants for the interview by explaining that we wanted them to tell us their "story" of counseling in their own words. Narrative researchers suggest prompting a temporal story by asking how a particular experience began (Riessman, 2008). In line with this, we started the interview by asking participants: "How did you first come to counseling?" Participants were encouraged to develop their narrative through a conversational style that included minimal encouragers, prompts, and follow-up questions. Where appropriate, the interviewer asked for specific examples or elaborations of participants' opinions. In this, the interviewer was careful not to introduce new areas through questioning but followed the lead of the participants. Interviews lasted for 45 min each. This length of time was somewhat shorter than is usual for narrative interviews with adults, but was designed to fit in with the school timetable. Judging from participants' responses, this seemed to be an adequate amount of time for a rich account to emerge without becoming uncomfortable for the young participants.

Data Analysis

As Braun and Clarke (2006) noted, it is impossible for researchers to avoid bringing their own assumptions and theories to bear on what they "see" in their data, but we were particularly concerned in this study to explore how clients might challenge existing professional knowledge in their accounts of counseling rather than simply imposing our own presuppositions. We therefore followed a two-stage process in our research, beginning with a largely inductive approach in our initial reading of the data, which allowed us to identify key ideas that emerged from the participants' accounts. These ideas were then subjected to further deductive analysis in the light of relevant theory and existing research.

Narrative researchers have recognized that it is not possible to pursue a narrative analysis through a set series of mechanical steps. The process of analysis is closer to an art and relies heavily on interpretation (Riessman, 2008). But nonetheless, it is important for the quality of the research to have a detailed knowledge of the way in which interpretations were developed (Morrow, 2005). The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The analysis began with the first author immersing herself in the transcribed interview material as is common practice in qualitative research (Morrow, 2005). She had conducted the interviews herself and was therefore familiar with the material. As recommended by qualitative researchers, repeated readings helped to identify possible avenues for analysis and key ideas that seemed to emerge from the data (Riessman, 2008). One of the most striking ideas to emerge from our initial analysis was the way that the participants depicted a highly active role for themselves in the counseling process. The prevalence of this idea in the participants' accounts resonated with research that had described a similar phenomenon under the label of "client agency." Using this theoretical idea, we then conducted a more systematic, deductive analysis in which we traced the way that client agency was constructed in the participants' narratives. This addressed the more specific research question: How are participants constructing the agency of the client? The theoretical conceptualization of agency described earlier guided the analysis here insofar as it enabled us to identify and label agency within participants' accounts and also provided a foundation for our analysis of the significance of agency in social context.

We began this stage of the analysis with a description of the overall way that client agency was portrayed in each participant's account. Thus, one "client" could emerge from the narrative as a highly responsible mature person, capable of making his or her own decisions, whereas another was described as being more passive and prepared to follow the advice of the counselor. In each case, we documented a rich description of the client, providing examples from the entire text of their interview that supported the particular depiction of the client's agency. The analysis of each participant's account of client agency allowed us to then search for narrative themes that reflected commonalities in the content of accounts of agency across the narratives (Riessman, 2008).

For our narrative thematic analysis, we focused on extended accounts within each narrative, rather than working with smaller segments of meaningful text as is typical of standard thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method allowed us to identify narrative themes that seemed to relate to the presence or absence of client agency in each participant's account and gave rise to a set of overarching themes. These included accounts of the client's agency in relation to the initial decision to attend counseling, the evaluation of the counselor/counseling, the selection or rejection of aspects of counseling, the assignment of responsibility for the process and outcome of counseling, and the extent to which clients were able to make their needs or wishes known to their counselor. In addition, we actively searched the data for any indication that suggested the absence of agency generally and negative examples in any specific themes identified in relation to client agency.

After an initial analysis had been conducted by the first author (KG), the second author (CC) explored, challenged, and discussed the interpretations. Analytic decisions were made through consensus following this discussion. The ideas developed were also discussed together with the counselors at the services who had facilitated the research. This was to help us better understand the context in which the counseling had occurred and to provide an opportunity for further dialogue that could enhance or challenge the researchers' own understanding.

Findings

Although not all participants reflected the same degree of agency in their constructions of themselves as clients, all 22 of the narratives in this study portrayed the client as having agency in at least some respect. This agency was depicted in one or more themes, including the construction of clients as exercising their choice in the decision to go to counseling, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the counselor, actively selecting or rejecting elements of the counseling or counselor, and claiming control over the outcome of therapy. We also included a theme that captures the way in which participants constructed clients as unable to exercise their agency overtly in counseling. These themes are presented below together with illustrative extracts from the narratives.

The Initial Decision: "It's My Choice"

The participants described a variety of reasons for attending their first counseling session, but all depicted themselves as having a choice about whether or not to engage with counseling. Although most narratives described how clients attended counseling on the basis of information provided by the counseling service or in discussion with friends, a number of participants (nine) appear to have been sent to counseling by an adult authority, often in response to problem behavior. In these cases, the construction of the client as having "a choice" stood out because it occurred in the context of what appeared to be some pressure from adults to attend sessions.

Sarah reported that she had had about 15 sessions of counseling, with her last session having been about 1 year ago. Her narrative depicted a client who was highly agentic, liked to make her own decisions, and was unwilling to position herself as in need of help. Her retrospective account of how she came to go to therapy turned a situation that potentially could be seen to undermine her agency to one in which she portrayed herself as being in control, as can be seen in the following extract:

> I was at [the mental health service], and they recommended that I go to school counseling. At first I was like 'Nah, no way! Then my parents both said to me you can go on your own accord. You don't have to go just because *we* think it's a good idea. And everyone was recommending that I go there, but they were like it's up to you. So eventually I thought I'll just give it a go, and then I went there.

In this extract, Sarah explained that she felt pressure from adults around her to go to counseling, but also makes it clear she could have said no. It was only at the point at which her parents assured her that it could be *her* choice that she was prepared to "give it a go."

As if to emphasize her own choice, Sarah's narrative described a second point at which she was able to assert the decision to

attend counseling as being under her control. This occurred within the first session:

> I didn't really like it at first. I just sat there and refused to say anything. But I was just being stubborn. I was like I'm not doing this, I can't be bothered. So I just sat there and I was like '*No!*'

Although Sarah was physically present in the counselor's office, she made it clear that *she* would decide whether or when she was prepared to participate. Sarah continued her narrative, saying how it was only when her counselor overtly provided her with a choice at the end of the session, saying "you can come back when *you* want," that she made the decision that she would return. But even then, Sarah talked about how she continued to exercise vigilance through the initial sessions until she decided the point at which she was ready to talk about the things that really mattered to her:

> When I first went, I didn't really spill everything out. . . . I just got to know her and said hi and told her a little bit about myself. Just not about problems or anything. Just saying hi and that kind of stuff.

There were a number of other narratives like Sarah's in which the participants described how they had asserted their right to choose in situations in which they may conceivably have felt a degree of powerlessness. But even in accounts where participants described a less potentially coercive situation, they seemed to actively claim their agency back from others who might be involved in the decision to attend counseling. Many participants spoke about how they listened to friends' suggestions or heard information about counseling, but often their stories emphasized that, in the end, the decision to attend was theirs alone and independent of any recommendation by another person. Furthermore, over half the participants, like Sarah, described how they had waited through the initial therapy session(s) and carefully decided when they felt comfortable enough to engage.

These accounts seemed to construct clients as having control over the decision to attend counseling, and participants often spoke about this as a prerequisite for their engagement. But in narratives such as Sarah's, it was possible to discern a tension between the claim that this was the client's choice and descriptions of the power that adults could exercise over them. Sarah seemed to have responded to these potential threats to her agency by fiercely asserting her own ability to choose in spite of the pressures around her. This allowed Sarah to construct herself as having some control over the decision to attend counseling, but ironically she also describes how, in the end, her actions fitted in with the expectations and demands of the mental health service, her parents, and perhaps also the counselor, albeit with the sense that this was on her own terms.

Evaluating the Merits of the Counselor: "I Decide Whether They Are Right for Me"

Many of the participants in this study depicted clients as agentic insofar as they were able to evaluate their counselors and make judgments about their suitability to meet their own needs. A large number of participants (15) described a process in which they assessed the strengths and weaknesses of their counselor and asserted their own capacity to decide who they were prepared to work with.

Alice provided a narrative that described her encounters with a number of different counselors within and outside of the school context. In her narrative, she positioned herself as something of an expert on counseling, using comparisons between the various counselors she had seen to set out a particular view of what constituted a good counselor. She began with a very favorable account of her school counselor whom she described as quirky, unusual, and, to her mind, better equipped to understand her and other young people:

> Yeah, straight away you can tell he's not a normal person. Straight away you can tell. He has this attitude and his personality and you look around everywhere and you can see all these different things. Like all the pictures and he seems to relate to kids. Like he just gets them to draw everything, and he's got boxes of toys so kids can play with them if they want, plays their own music. Yeah, it seems like he does the same thing, someone I can relate to.

Unlike most of the professionals Alice had seen, she described how her school counselor had also disclosed the mistakes he had made as a young person, and Alice saw this as a sign that he would understand her youthful world rather than stand in professional judgment of her:

> He told me about his childhood and the stupid things he did in his childhood and all that kind of stuff, and things he goes through and things he does to help himself as well and says how it works for him. So he gives me an idea like 'Oh, maybe I could try that and it would help.' I can laugh at things he's done as well so it's kind of like . . .

Through her account, Alice established her counselor's unconventionality, his ability to engage with the world of young people, and his nonprofessional style as the characteristics that enabled her to begin to engage in the counseling process. She, however, contrasted this image of her school counselor with the formality and insincerity that she attributed to mental health professionals in general. She provided this account of the way that professionals play a formulaic role while giving little back to the client:

> Some of them just like nod and go along with it . . . they say something at the very end. It's kind of like they're not really there, and then at the end they say . . . that's all I got from what they said, just whatever that last comment is they say, that's all . . .

Alice elaborated this with an extended portrayal of an overprofessionalized therapist she had seen for an assessment within the state mental health service. She described this psychologist as someone who was more interested in writing notes than in engaging with her:

> She just seemed so serious and wrote down everything. Five pages later and she's like 'Okay/' [My school counselor] doesn't write a single thing down, but he remembers it all, which makes it better because it's like he's listening to you and everything. I guess she's listening to me, but she's just writing it down and just not taking it in.

Alice's account of the contrast between her school counselor, who was more genuine in his interest, and the "professional" therapist, who she portrays as not really listening, is presented as a justification for her choice about who she has chosen to seek help from. She claimed her right to choose not to engage with the professional sort of counselor:

> So it was kind of like, I don't believe you understand what I'm talking about. . . . So it was kind of like, you're not going to know anything about me. It's just going to be a waste of time.

It appeared that Alice's most recent counseling had been with her preferred school counselor some 3 months previous to the interview, and it may be that this recent good experience reinforced her negative evaluation of her previous counselors.

In their narratives, Alice and others made it clear that the client was capable of evaluating his or her counselors and deciding which one was right for him or her. This ironically allowed them to appropriate the usual role of the counselor, who would in the initial stages of counseling be assumed to be conducting some evaluation of the client. Furthermore, in Alice's account, her preferences also challenged the usual hierarchies of therapy by undermining the value of the counselor's professional qualities and highlighting those that limited the differences between the client and the counselor. In this she was not alone, and a number of the participants also defined their counselors' merits quite specifically in terms of their nonprofessional attributes. Participants, for example, referred to the counseling relationship as being more like a friendship or emphasized the benefits the counselor had obtained from the relationship with them either through "learning" more about "how to do counseling" or by simply enjoying the company of their young clients.

The analysis suggests that a number of participants saw themselves as highly active in evaluating their counselors. They did not passively accept their counselor's professional authority, but instead described themselves as being able to actively assert their agency through a careful assessment process. Furthermore, their criteria for evaluating counselors also seemed, in many cases, to be constructed as a challenge to the normal hierarchy of counseling. Counselors were mostly not constructed as experts, but rather as the equals of their young clients and as taking part in a reciprocal relationship with them. This subversion of the usual power relationship in counseling enabled participants to construct increased potential for agency within the counseling relationship and to challenge the power of the counselor.

Selecting and Rejecting Aspects of Counseling: "I Take What I Need"

A number of participants (12) described how, as clients, they had selected and rejected aspects of counseling that they felt fit (or did not fit) with their needs at particular times. Lucy, for example, spoke about how she evaluated and selected what she wanted from counseling. Her narrative interwove accounts of her experiences with a number of different counselors, the most recent of whom she had last seen several months before. She described how she had first gone to see a counselor of her own volition because she was feeling "down" and did not understand why. But she found the initial approach of the counselor unhelpful:

> Originally she told me not to worry about it too much and to just get involved in as many things as I could and like don't cut myself off. That very first time I couldn't really identify with what the counselor said because I felt like that wouldn't help.

Lucy went on to provide further explanation for why she did not find this advice useful:

I felt like it might have been almost as if we were trying to jump straight to how we can fix and not really get down into [it]. I think we were focussing more on *why* when I was keen to tell her *how* it was upsetting me. And when you're in that frame of mind, the last thing you really feel like doing is getting out there and getting involved. It kind of made me think like: 'Oh my gosh, too much to handle!'

But in response to an interviewer question, Lucy explained that in spite of her misgivings about this approach, she initially went along with it:

I just went with it: 'Yes I'll try.' We talked about a few things that I could do. Like things that I enjoy doing. Making sure my exercise is up and all of those things. To be honest, I don't think it really changed how I was feeling at all. I didn't really jump out there. Just, nothing really changed after that first counseling session.

Lucy said she recognized that the counselor was trying to be helpful but felt that she had not understood what she had needed:

I felt like she was there for me, but at the same time I sort of look back and thought: 'Was she really listening to what I said?'

In the following extract, Lucy weighed the counselor's knowledge about depression against her own sense of what was right for her, and came down firmly in favor of her own evaluation of what constituted good counseling:

But now looking back I can see why she did what she did . . . But I think well those are like the basics, when you have depression. To know that you are getting involved and that you aren't completely shutting yourself off because that would just make it worse. But to tell someone in the heat of the moment, it didn't really make sense to me . . . I scheduled another appointment. But not with the same counselor. And that was less like 'counseling.' She wasn't really like telling me what I should do and stuff like that. It was more me talking about it and her helping me to expand on what I was thinking. And that was really helpful.

Lucy used this example to draw firm conclusions about the importance of taking what she wanted from counseling and presented this as a general piece of advice for others about the value of exercising their own agency:

And I know a lot of people that [counseling] has helped. I think it's important to know what works for you. I knew certain things that didn't really sit well with me and you just move on from that and maybe change or see someone else. That's the other thing that's really important as well.

In her narrative, Lucy constructs herself as a client who is able to select or reject aspects of the counseling offered to her. But although she was clear about the importance of being a discerning client, she seemed to struggle to let her counselor know how she felt. Her solution was simply to find another counselor whose approach was a better fit for her needs as she saw them.

Other narratives also showed how clients, even within the context of an ongoing therapy relationship, constructed themselves as being able to actively cut and paste aspects of their counseling into a form that matched their needs, discarding elements they felt did not fit with them. Kate described how she had been seen continuously by the same school counselor for over 3 years. She described her counselor as warm and available and spoke about how she had come to depend on this relationship in order to keep attending school. But even in her relatively less agentic narrative, she depicted herself as a client who was very clear about what she did and did not want from her counselor. Her narrative repeatedly emphasized how talking and being listened to was a priority for her in counseling:

To be honest, I just like to talk. I just like having someone listen to me. My parents are really hard to get through to. They just don't understand. So if I try to tell them something, they just don't get it.

Kate explained that when her counselor listened to her, it made her feel like someone cared about her:

She didn't make me think any different. It was just . . . I just knew she was listening. She didn't say much. I just knew she was listening . . . I guess I kind of felt like someone cared. Like someone cared enough to listen to how I felt about everything that is happening.

But in spite of her talk of valuing what the counselor had to offer in this respect, Kate also clearly identified which aspects of counseling she had found less helpful. In the following extract, she talked assertively about the way she dismissed the counselor's attempts to use what appear to be distraction techniques:

She did it in the beginning, but I don't really think that stuff works with me. I don't like being told to go for a walk or something. This is what I feel like when I'm angry or upset or something. I don't feel like drawing a picture or going for a walk. I just feel like sitting and having a cry. . . . It's not what I want to do when I'm feeling like that.

Kate was also one of the only participants who said she had been able to tell her counselor what approach she preferred in counseling. It may be that her experience of counseling, which was longer than that of many other participants, had helped to facilitate her clear identification of what worked well for her, and it may be that the quality of the relationship did indeed allow her to communicate this to her counselor.

Although a number of clients spoke about selecting and rejecting aspects of what a counselor provided, a smaller number seemed to construct themselves as having been able to select out particular counselors to meet particular needs at different times. Richard had initially been referred to the state mental health service because of problems with aggression and had later been sent to school counseling by the school authorities when under threat of disciplinary action. Richard spoke about how he had made intermittent use of the school counseling service over a period of about 2 years, often in response to further injunctions from the school authorities. Richard explained how counseling had been used by the school authorities to control his difficult behavior, but in spite of this, he constructed himself as a highly agentic client who actively sought out what he needed from counseling. In the following extract, he described the way he evaluated the relative strengths and weaknesses of different counselors and then selected what he needed from what he clearly saw as a kind of "smorgasbord" of options available within the team of counselors:

It depends on the situation you're in I guess. If it's girls . . . about girl issues a lot but I've gone to [Counselor 1] a lot because he knew more. I don't know, he's been through it all. He's older, he's wiser. But say if I was in trouble with guys giving me threats or something like that I know I'd go to [Counselor 2] because he knows the guys, . . . he

can give me advice on how to get them to back off. If its family issues, which were happening a lot, I'd go to [Counselor 3] and would just be able to, she'd give me that retreat away from family.

In Richard's account, he identified what each of the counselors had to offer him and portrayed himself as being able to select out what was important for him in a specific situation. This ironically reversed the power of decision making evident in his account of his initial forced referral to the counseling service. But although Richard appeared to be inventing a resourceful and creative solution to deal with his problems, his agency also represents a challenge to the way that counseling, which values an ongoing relationship with a single counselor, is normally organized.

In describing the process of selection (and rejection) of elements of counseling or counselors, the participants constructed themselves agents who knew what they needed and described how they were able to actively select this from what is made available to them. But only a very few (two) seemed to express their choice overtly, and most, like Lucy, spoke about how they made their preferences known passively rather than overtly, for example, by not following through on suggestions or changing counselors. Furthermore, as it appears in Richard's case, in spite of his ability to actively pick and choose his counselors, he still complied with the repeated injunctions of the school authorities to attend counseling. It may be that constraints on the client's ability to resist particular interventions are limited by the broader authority structures and expectations of social behavior that govern relationships between adults and young people in a school counseling setting.

Taking Responsibility for Counseling: "I Make It Work"

Although many of the participants gave accounts in which it was clear that they had valued what the counselor had provided in terms of support, advice, or facilitation, half of them (11 participants) constructed narratives that situated the client as primary in producing any benefits achieved through counseling. These narratives depicted the client as having the dominant role in counseling and assigned only a relatively minor role to the counselor.

Clara had seen a school counselor regularly over a period of several years but had stopped about 3 months previous to the research interview. She offered a narrative that demonstrated a shift in her perspective from one in which she had initially thought that the counselor would tell her what to do to one in which she had come to realize that she was in charge of her own life:

> That was the impression of therapy in general which is what you get from the media a lot is . . . the therapist will fix your life. So that was the impression I had of it. But that's not what they do. They're not really there to fix your life. They want you to fix your own life, and they want to be there for support. . . . As I got older, we were just having mature talks, and the more maturely we talked, the more I sort of started to accept that they're not going to help me and that it's just somebody to talk to, and I started learning to solve my own problems, yeah.

As her narrative continued, Clara became increasingly emphatic that it was she herself who did not want to be told what to do in counseling. For her counseling was about having the space to talk about her own decisions and to exercise her autonomy:

> I sort of didn't want to go into counseling and hear something that I don't want to hear. . . . It was helpful when they would sit down with me and say you get to choose the direction in your life. . . .

Clara elaborated her determination to arrive at her own decisions independently. In the following account, she seemed to imply that counseling had the potential to undermine her autonomy as well as to facilitate it. She elaborated on a particular example in which she received unwanted advice about a problem relationship in the form of a pamphlet given to her by her counselor:

> And so she gave me this brochure, and it was about unhealthy relationships and I remember . . . It's all coming back to me now. She told me that I'm in an unhealthy relationship with my ex because he was quite controlling. But I remember I didn't want to hear that because I was happy in the relationship . . . So I made the appointment and then I thought about it and I didn't want to retell the story and get told something I didn't want to hear, and sometimes that happens in counseling . . . No I just said thank you, I said I'll read through it and yes I'll think about it . . . So I thanked her and said that I will think about it, and I will talk to him. But it's not something that I did because sometimes the advice they give you is general advice, and it doesn't apply to every single person.

Through her account, Clara elaborated this specific incident into a more general message about the importance of retaining autonomy within the context of counseling:

> Well, I think it's really important that people don't rely on guidance [counseling] because I found that I actually feel a lot better dealing with my life by myself sometimes. At the end of the day, I didn't take all their advice. So I didn't need to be going every day, which I often didn't. [I] don't need to go all the time. . . . The problem with me is I'm very, I'm not good at taking advice on board. I always ask for advice. I've been to counseling so many times. but at the end of the day I'm so straightforward and I'll just do what I feel at the time. It doesn't mean it's always a good thing, but I just do things without thinking, so sometimes I would structure a plan in counseling, but as soon as I leave the room it sort of, I'll go home and do what feels right I suppose.

She went on to talk about how the times that had been most helpful for her were, in fact, the times that she had simply gone and sat alone in the waiting room of the counseling service:

> If I'm being 100% honest, I think the times that I've left feeling better have been the times I've just sat and cried on the seat, and I've just sat and cried and they've just left me there for the period and sat and cried, and those are the times I've felt the best. But everybody is different I think [Interviewer: And that would be outside in the waiting area?], Yeah. I think my problem is I'm very headstrong, so I don't take advice very well, so that's probably why . . .

In this account, Clara used the idea that counselors are not meant to give advice, to assert her own right to ignore any advice they give that contradicted her own preferences. She clearly valued her own autonomy and positioned herself as needing to protect her own agency against the potential for counseling to undermine her ability to think or act independently. One of her solutions was to use the counseling space without actually having to see a counselor, thus allowing her need for comfort while also fending off the potential for reliance, which she constructed as being a threat to her agency. But although all of this helped Clara to establish her

own control over counseling, it is not difficult to imagine that Clara's assertion of her right to stay in a potentially controlling relationship with her boyfriend might in fact have undermined her power in other areas of her life.

Caroline gave an account that similarly asserted her ability to make counseling work while minimizing the role of the counselor in this. She constructed a narrative that described how her intermittent contact with several different school counselors had been largely unhelpful. Nonetheless, she invoked her own agency in accounting for how she was still able to find value in her experience of counseling, largely through her own efforts. In the following extract, she talked about how, as a person, she saw herself as being in charge of her own life:

> Yeah, it's just; it's more like I haven't been raised to let other people think for me. I mean I've always been taught to make my own conclusions and to think things through for myself. So just like having some other people with their ideas and then me thinking do I actually agree with that or why not? I mean its how I've always been brought up.

Having constructed herself as personally agentic, she challenged assumptions about the counselor's expertise and weighed this against a client's ability to make up his or her own mind:

> I'd say be open-minded. I'd say don't be like, just take what the counselors. . . . I mean just because they're trained doesn't mean they get everything right. Some things they get right and they've had a lot more experience. So they have the perspective to say well, I think . . . But don't take everything they say particularly seriously. I mean I think it is good. I think you've just got to have your own ideas and you've got to know what you think.

Later in her narrative, she again denigrated the "book knowledge" of counselors, emphasizing instead the importance of the client retaining his or her own sense of what was right for him or her in therapy:

> Yeah. I think also then you come up with something that will work for you. Because I mean just this is what you should do . . . might be the textbook right answer, but it may not necessarily work with individual people.

Caroline was one of a very few participants (three) who described a largely negative experience of counseling but nonetheless went on to explain how it was through her own agency that she had been able to take something of value from her experience of counseling:

> It's basically been good because I talked a lot, and even though I agreed with absolutely nothing my counselor said, I came up with my own cool versions. . . . Which was really good. You know, after talking about it, I kind of did make more sense of it out of my own mind. And just having, I mean she asked the right questions and she did. And I just didn't like the cool version she got. But in forcing me to think about those questions, I got a lot out of it.

She elaborated this insight into a more general statement about the importance of autonomy in her life:

> Yeah, you know like I'm quite happy for everybody to like, have their own views. That doesn't bother me. I don't feel the need to correct them or make my own opinion known. But I'm certainly one to learn

things for myself, and I certainly want to work out what's best for me without someone else telling me.

However, toward the end of her account, Caroline suggested a more vulnerable sense of herself as someone who might indeed need some kind of support:

> I generally just, I guess I do feel things I don't realize I do. I mean that's something I need to work on because it generally comes out in loss of sleep. I'd never kind of had a whole night's sleep, and I get really grumpy and stuff. I can't figure out why. Again we're never encouraged at home to talk about feelings. It's always, like, what's best in the long run and that kind of thing.

This seemed particularly poignant as Caroline had also explained that her last experience of counseling had been a full 18 months previously, underlining the lack of support she had had available to her in recent times.

Clara and Caroline gave accounts that situated the client as central to the benefits obtained in counseling. But although their narratives differed in terms of their overall tone, with Caroline's account being far more negative than Clara's, they both seem to suggest that the client's agency had to be protected and defended against the threat of incursion from the counselor. In these accounts, both participants deployed a common counseling discourse that positions counselors as being facilitators of client change rather than givers of advice. But they seemed to appropriate this discourse to actively challenge the power of the counselor and to assert their own. Although this assertion of client autonomy may create a sense of the client's control over their counseling experience, these narratives suggest that there are ways in which their empowerment may be compromised by this position. For Clara, her reluctance to take her counselor's advice may have meant that she remained in a harmful relationship and for Caroline that she continued to manage difficult circumstances without support.

Expressing an Opinion: "But Can I Say What I Think?"

Although participants used their narratives to construct clients as having clear ideas about what they wanted from therapy, being capable of evaluating their counselors relative to these and making choices about whom they would see or what they were prepared to take from counseling, the narratives offered very few examples where participants had been able to overtly express their wishes or intentions to their counselors. Instead, all but two participants spoke about using passive or indirect ways of managing challenges to their agency in the counseling situation.

Margie produced a narrative that asserted a strong sense of her agency through her discerning evaluation of the large number of counselors and mental health professionals she had seen over a period of 2–3 years. She expressed clear and sometimes rather sharp opinions about her various counselors:

> So they've all got different styles. I've seen two different, well actually three different ones, and I saw a man because that was sort of urgent but that was later on, and I saw another lady as well, and she sort of took things from a different perspective. I talked about my poems and then she had a different stance. It was sort of cognitive brain therapy talking about like yeah . . . She sort of had a set sort of standard to go by and she was, it was sort of straight to the point and sort of knew what to say sort of thing . . . I think that sort of, I

preferred the other counselor I went to because, and that I've been to ever since because first one I feel like she says that to everyone and it's not, I just feel like she uses that technique on everyone, and it's sort of like I didn't feel as though it was specific to my situation and sort of yeah, I just felt like she just used it on everyone and expected it to work. Do you know what I mean? About the psychologist out of school that I saw I didn't, yeah she just didn't work for me, she just wasn't . . . and she's actually this year taken a year to revamp and because I just don't think it was for her. I think she studied the wrong thing, and that's just personally how I feel.

But in spite of Margie constructing herself as being able to make clear judgments about the shortcomings of her counselors and other mental health professionals she had seen, she also portrayed herself as being much less able to act assertively than her sharp evaluations would lead us to expect. In the following extract, for example, she described how she had tried to extract herself politely from a counseling relationship with a male counselor she did not feel comfortable with:

> I felt awkward. I didn't want to show it, but I didn't feel like I could fully open up to him, and I would never have been able to cry and break down in front of him and that sort of stuff . . . . I think he just wanted to try and wrap it up and ended up and get out of there, so I think we just ended up talking about broad things like school grades . . . [did you tell him?] No. I just hate bringing people down, and I just like I just wouldn't be able to tell him. I just don't because I think that a lot of girls would be fine with it, but I just don't want to bring him down, and I think he was trying his best. So I just thought okay that's it for me and stuff like that, and I just got out of there, and now I've seen this lady and yeah she's great. So I think you have to choose them wisely and definitely at least have one session with them, and if you don't feel comfortable, you can just leave.

Margie showed how she managed the situation resourcefully, by steering the focus of the counseling to less significant issues and then going on to find another counselor. But her account also alluded to social constraints that may work against young clients expressing their opinions more openly in counseling. In this case, Margie accounted for her silence on her preferences as politely caring for her counselor's feelings. Margie's narrative was one that was echoed in a number of others', who also had difficulty overtly expressing their views about counseling to the counselor.

Other participant accounts described similarly passive responses to a divergence of opinion with their counselor. Max, for example, had seen a counselor four times at his girlfriend's insistence and had last attended a session some 2 months previous to our interview. His initial decision to attend counseling seemed to have owed something to an attempt to please his girlfriend had he provided a largely positive but sometimes formulaic account of his positive feelings about counseling:

> Oh yeah, the lady was friendly as, real friendly, real happy, which made me pretty happy. It was just someone to talk to. It was good.

But toward the end of his narrative, Max began to suggest some ambivalence about his involvement in counseling. His response to aspects of counseling he disliked was very passive, but apparently effective. He described how he simply tuned out when he did not feel like being a part of the counseling conversation:

> I don't know. Sometimes I just don't feel like talking in there. I don't feel like talking about me and [my girlfriend] or whatever. So I kind

of just sit there in some sessions and just think. [Interviewer: What do you think about?] Just all sorts.

Even though Max's narrative expressed a degree of compliance with the demands of counseling, which was unusual in the participant group, he described having found a way to resist aspects of counseling. But like others, his resistance was expressed passively and covertly rather than directly to the counselor.

Emma's narrative offered some insights into the reasons why young clients may not find it easy to tell their counselor what they do or do not prefer. Emma had had about 10 sessions of counseling with two different school counselors, with her last being a few months prior to the research interview. She spoke at length about aspects of the counseling arrangements that she had not liked. But as with many of the participants, she emphasized the importance of politeness in how she managed difference of opinion or dissatisfaction with the counselor. When asked by the interviewer about why she had not told her counselor about an experience she considered unhelpful, she replied:

> Because I don't like complaining. I'm all for just keeping quiet, yeah.

Emma's narrative was the only one that explicitly acknowledged the impact of the power imbalance on the ability for a young client to express his or her agency directly to the counselor. As she put it:

> Yeah how do you say to an [adult] 'Hey by the way, I don't think that's quite right'? Yeah sometimes you should. But I've not got the courage to.

The participants' narratives seem to suggest that although they constructed themselves as agentic across a range of situations in counseling, they recognized constraints on their ability to speak out about what they wanted or did not like. Although in most cases participants' reluctance to speak out about their concerns was attributed to politeness and to a desire to protect the feelings of the counselor, Emma points to the power imbalance that might exist between an adult professional and a young student in the hierarchical context of a school, which may make differences in opinion hard to negotiate. But, as invested in their agency as these young clients appear to be, it may be difficult for them to own their powerlessness in this situation.

Discussion

The young clients who took part in this study seemed to construct themselves as highly active agents in their counseling in a manner similar to that found in adult clients (Bohart, 2000). They constructed themselves as being able to exercise their agency in a variety of different ways. They positioned themselves as having a choice about whether to engage with counseling, a factor that has been recognized by other researchers as being important in facilitating engagement with counseling (Wilson & Deane, 2001). They constructed themselves as being able to assert agency through a process of careful evaluation of their counselor's strengths and weaknesses, with the aim of finding a counselor who they felt was a good fit for their needs. Furthermore, they described themselves as being able to select and reject aspects of the counseling resources available to suit themselves. In some cases,

clients, rather than counselors, were also depicted as the primary agents of positive change.

However, there did seem to be a difference in the tone of the accounts given by the young participants in this study in comparison to findings in relation to the agency of adult clients. In this study, the participants' narratives seemed to express greater awareness of the potential for the client's agency to be compromised and their need to subvert the power arrangements and discourses that potentially threatened young people's agency in counseling. They described how they did not simply exercise agency but rather wrested it from the counseling situation. In order to construct themselves as agents, participants' accounts minimized the extent to which others had control over their decisions in relation to counseling, challenged traditional professional–client hierarchies, and played down the significance of the counselor's role (in its conventional sense) in producing change.

Yet in spite of participants' commitment to a view of themselves as agents, their accounts also suggested that there were limits on the way that this translated into their having real power over the process of counseling. Their accounts suggested that their agency was largely limited to reflective evaluations of aspects of the counseling situation. Rennie (2004) pointed out that this internal reflection may be considered an important part of client agency, but it may, however, not always translate into power over the counseling situation. In spite of the participants' strong and sometimes critical opinions about counseling, there was little suggestion in their accounts that they saw themselves as being able to overtly resist or challenge the wishes of the adults around them, including their counselors. Instead, they described responses that seemed to have a great deal in common with that of adults, who tended, at least on the surface, to defer to their counselors (Rennie, 1994a).

The understanding of young clients' agency arising from this study may be useful for clinicians. This study supports other research that suggests the importance of respect for the autonomy and independence of the young client as a prerequisite for their engagement in counseling (Sauter et al., 2009). As young people's constructions of agency seems largely to be aimed at getting what they felt they needed from counseling, this suggests that their agency might be facilitated to produce better outcomes for this group of clients, as has been done in relation to adult clients (Williams & Levitt, 2007). But there are potential challenges to being able to harness young clients' agency as a positive force in counseling given the likelihood that their wishes and opinions may not be voiced directly to the counselor. Rennie (1994b) suggested that when this occurs, there is a risk clients may resort to covert forms of resistance to express their agency. Young clients' tendency in this study to resort to silence or other passive forms of disengagement have the potential to threaten the therapeutic alliance and impact negatively on outcomes (Stringer et al., 2010). Preventing this may require a more active attempt on the part of counselors to engage their young clients on issues of potential difference and to explore their evaluations of counseling throughout the course of therapeutic engagement. This suggestion corresponds with Duncan et al.'s (2003) proposals for eliciting regular feedback from clients. However, given that young people are cautious about voicing their opinions, it may be that this might be better done through in-session dialogue that recognizes and explores the meaning of client resistance and potential barriers to their enactment of agency (Williams & Levitt, 2007). As Bury et

al. (2007) noted, it would be important to be explicit about the relative power imbalances in counseling and to consider the implications of these within these kinds of discussion. In addition, counselors need to be aware of the context both within and outside of counseling that may constrain the attempts of their young clients to claim agency. In particular, they need to be more aware of the potential for them and the systems within which they operate to undermine the agency of young people, to silence their views and close down opportunities for them to act on their own judgments (Evans, 2007).

However, while respecting the agency of their young clients, it would also be important for clinicians not to take at face value their client's assertions of agency but to explore the challenges associated with asserting agency and to help their clients work through these in a constructive way. From the point of view of an individual's experience of counseling, a felt sense of agency may be a valuable conduit for engagement in counseling (Timulak & Elliott, 2003). However, an illusory sense of power may mask a mismatch between the clients' and the counselor's expectations of counseling and result in young clients taking responsibility for situations they are unable to realistically control (Sharland, 2006). Furthermore, the young participants' construction of their own agency may disallow them access to helpful or necessary support in dealing with their difficulties (Baker, 2010).

Emerging from this study is a contradictory account of agency, one that both facilitates potential access to power and highlights the elusiveness of this same power. This reflects the complex array of social discourses and structures that help to produce (and limit) individual agency. Young people like those in this study inhabit a social world in which pervasive ideas about freedom of choice and individual accountability are likely to influence their ideas about themselves as clients (Prior, 2012). The positioning of "adolescence" in developmental psychology discourse as a time autonomy needs are paramount may also go some way to explaining the investment that young people have in this view of themselves (Burman, 2008). These ideas may be easily accommodated within counseling frameworks that emphasize a client-led process (Rogers, 1951). But in contrast to these perspectives, there are also powerful discourses and arrangements that may disempower young people (Evans, 2007). This includes the power imbalances between an adult and a young person, between a professional and a client, and between the school authorities and a student. Finding a way to claim agency and power in this complex and contradictory social context is a demanding task for a young person who is likely to also be experiencing psychological distress.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations that need to be considered when looking at the findings of this study. There can be no attempt to make statistical generalizations from this kind of small-scale, qualitative study, and any theoretical generalizations from this study would need to be limited to similar Western settings where social ideas about agency and the forms of counseling are similar. It may also be that middle-class youth, like those in this study, may have more opportunities to claim their agency than other groups constrained by economics or social marginalization. Furthermore, although the notification for this study was sent to all clients who had used the counseling service in the defined period, those who

agreed to take part were self-selected from this pool. There is a likelihood that clients who volunteered to take part in this study were also those who had experienced more benefits from counseling—one of which might be an increased sense of agency (Williams & Levitt, 2007). It would be useful to conduct further research in this area, looking at a larger number of young clients who could speak of less positive experiences of counseling. Putting one's self forward to take part in this kind of research is an act that may involve a degree of felt agency, and the interview situation itself called on the participants to be the "experts" on their own experience. These features of the research context may have also contributed to the constructions of client agency produced by the participants (Stephens, 2011).

Finally, it is also important to remember that the agency constructed by participants in this study may not reflect their experience of agency in counseling or their capacity to enact it in that context. Instead, it reveals constructions of agency that are socially available to them and the way that they use these to produce, retrospectively, an understanding of their own role in counseling. Nonetheless, although this construction does not necessarily translate directly to the counseling situation, it may have implications for the value young people ascribe to their counseling experience and the way they see themselves as being able to participate in it.

Conclusions

This study clearly supports the adult literature on client agency, but the analysis suggests that it may be useful to place this agency in the context of social constraints and possibilities and the power this allows for young people. These strong agentic constructions of clients in the narratives of participants have romantic appeal, suggesting a young client who is able to find and get what he or she needs from counseling. But although this view has value, a more skeptical analysis must also recognize that some of the claims to agency may be overstated and may not always recognize the constraints that operate to limit young people's actual choices around counseling. Counselors might be advised to approach young people in counseling with respect for their constructions of themselves as agents and recognize the potential to harness this to improve counseling outcomes. But they should also have an awareness of the limits and possibilities of young people's ability to exercise their agency within the power arrangements of the counseling setting and the pitfalls of abdicating responsibility for the well-being of young people to the youth themselves.

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