

A Qualitative Exploration of International Students' Experience of Counselling Services at
University

Setareh Najmi

Faculty of Education, Educational Counselling

University of Ottawa

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Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Cristelle Audet

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Abstract

This phenomenological qualitative study aimed to forefront international students' experiences of receiving counselling services in a university setting. Three international students, recruited from two universities in eastern Canada using criterion sampling, were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. In this phenomenological qualitative study, within- and between-person analyses were conducted for three transcribed interviews, from which eight main themes emerged: (a) openness towards seeking counselling, (b) hesitancy towards seeking counselling, (c) helpful aspects of counselling, (d) hindering aspects of counselling, (e) positive aspects of therapeutic relationship, (f) hindrances to therapeutic relationship, (g) counsellor's cultural awareness, and (h) counsellor's limited cultural awareness. The themes can be understood, and are explicated along four dimensions: seeking counselling, perceptions of counselling effectiveness, therapeutic relationship, and culture in counselling. The results from this study provide insight into international students' counselling needs, expectations, and experiences. Special attention is given to the perceived expression of in-session counsellor cultural awareness and discussed using the integrated etic-emic framework. Implications for counsellors and university counselling services, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research are provided.

To my mom

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In recent decades, universities have witnessed an increase in the number of international students (Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007). Accompanying this cross-national trend, various cross-cultural concerns arise such as discrimination and prejudice, culture shock, homesickness, communication problems, and language barriers (Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007). A review of the literature suggests that there are still cross-cultural barriers that interfere with international students having their needs met through the counselling process which, in turn, create challenges, such as “cultural adaptation of techniques, counselling roles and boundaries, and engagement problems” for counsellors working in university settings (Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007, p.182).

University is a stressful period for both local and international students. However, for international students, adjusting to new educational and social systems may also be accompanied by challenges of adapting to a new culture as sojourners (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007).

International students may encounter various cross-cultural adjustments during their stay in the host country. Some of the most common difficulties cited in the literature are: (a) adjustment to a new culture (Arthur, 1997; Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994; Olivas & Li, 2006; Russell, Thomson, & Rosenthal, 2008), (b) language difficulties (Arthur, 2004; Dipeolu, Kang, & Cooper, 2007; Mori, 2000; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Olivas & Li, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003), (c) financial problems (Arthur, 1997; Dipeolu, et al., 2007; Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994; Komiya & Eells, 2001; Yi, Giseala, & Kishimoto, 2003), (d) racial discrimination and prejudice (Arthur, 2004; Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007; Hanassab, 2006; Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004), and (e) lack of a social support network (Rosenthal et al., 2007; Sandhu, 1994).

One of the major concerns that international students may experience during their stay in

the host culture is dealing with cross-culture transitions (Leong & Chou, 2002). Generally, more differences between the student's host culture and the home country may result in experiencing greater adjustment difficulties (Arthur, 1997). Therefore, it should not be postulated that cross-cultural difficulties are experienced as equally and challenging by all international students (Arthur, 2010).

It is important for counsellors working with international students to have a clear knowledge of challenges and difficulties related to the cultural adjustment period and acculturation process (Arthur, 2010). University counselling services offer personal, academic, and career counselling services, and are available to both local and international students (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007). It is noteworthy that even though international students are at risk of experiencing various adjustment difficulties, they are believed to underutilize counselling services available to them (Arthur, 2004; Bradley, Parr, Lan, Bingi, & Gould, 1995; Dipeolu, Kang, & Cooper, 2007; Komiya & Eells, 2001; Morgan, Ness, & Robinson, 2003; Nilsson, Berkel, Flores, & Lucas, 2004; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Raunic & Xenos, 2008; Russell, Thomson, & Rosenthal; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Yi, Giseala, & Kishimoto, 2003). It is also reported that when these students do use counselling services, counselling either results in early termination (Mori, 2000) or the experience is unsatisfactory (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

International students' hesitancy to seek counselling services may be due, but not limited, to cultural stigmas attached to seeking professional help (Seo, 2005), unfamiliarity with counselling services (Raunic & Xenos, 2008; Seo, 2005; Yen & Inose, 2003), low usage of mental health services in their home country (Seo, 2005), and belief that they are capable of solving their own problems (Flisher, De Beer, & Bokhorst, 2002; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

Thus far, research on international students has been predominantly conducted in the U.S.

and Australia. International students attending universities in Canada may have different experiences than those attending universities in other countries specifically related, but not limited, to available university services and resources. In addition, most studies related to studying international students have utilized quantitative or mixed methods. Even though the international student population in Canada has increased in recent decades and continues to face unique challenges, research focusing on this population is still limited.

Given our limited understanding of international students' counselling needs and experiences, it is important to obtain more knowledge about this population and to acquire it in meaningful ways. This claim is further supported by the many theoretical constructs that may guide the cross-cultural work of counsellors, but have yet to be well understood in the context of applications with international students. To this end, I propose conceptualizing international students' cross-cultural experiences in counselling using the integrative etic-emic approach as a framework to gain insight into international students' counselling needs, expectations, and experiences.

The purpose of this study, which was conducted in a Canadian context, is to deepen our understanding of international students' experience of counselling in a university setting. More specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions: What are international students' experience of (a) circumstances leading up to counselling, (b) engaging in the counselling process, (c) the counsellor and the therapeutic relationship, and (d) termination and post-termination? Lastly, what recommendations might international students offer counsellors to foster a more positive counselling experience?

In order to gather rich and descriptive information about international students' experience of counselling in Canadian university counselling settings, a phenomenological

qualitative approach was used. In conducting culturally sensitive research, qualitative methods, as opposed to quantitative methods, have been highly recommended (Offet-Gartner, 2010). Qualitative methods have been appreciated for their ability to depict lived experiences of the participants, and provide meanings of those experiences (Offet-Gartner, 2010).

This thesis consists of five chapters. In Chapter One, I introduce the topic of the study, which is international students' experience of counselling at a university setting in Canada. I present the problem statement regarding international students' utilization of counselling services, the research questions, and the methodology used to address the research questions.

In Chapter Two, I offer a definition of international students and explore the existing literature, which includes the prevalence of international students pursuing university studies in Canada, challenges for university students in general and specific to international students, international students' utilization of counselling services and perceptions of counselling, and theoretical orientations to counselling international students.

Chapter Three is the method section where I describe my chosen qualitative methodology of phenomenology; participant sampling; the instruments I used to gather the data, which included a demographic questionnaire and a semi-structure interview protocol; and the procedures I applied for the data collection, analysis, and validity and trustworthiness measures.

Chapter Four comprises the results of the study and includes a detailed description of each participant's counselling experience based on his or her respective interview and my preliminary analysis of the interviews. The descriptive summaries describe circumstances leading up to seeking counselling, issues presented in counselling, expectations and effectiveness of counselling, the therapeutic relationship, perceptions of culture in counselling, perceptions of the counselling process, termination, and future counselling. The eight themes generated from an

in-depth within and between-person analysis are presented and explicated in terms of “polarities” along four dimensions: (a) seeking counselling, (b) perceptions of counselling effectiveness, (c) therapeutic relationship, and (d) culture in counselling.

Chapter Five, the discussion section, comprises consideration of the participants’ transitional difficulties, and an interpretation of the dimensions, themes, and clusters of meaning grounded in the literature on international students. I further conceptualize the findings specifically related to cross-cultural observations offered by the participants by applying the proposed integrative etic-emic framework. I offer implications informed by the findings that may benefit counsellors working with international students in university settings. Finally, I present limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research that build on this study’s findings.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Definition of International Students

According to Paige (1990), international students are defined as “individuals who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of citizenship in order to participate in international educational exchange as students” (p. 162). International students have also been referred to as “sojourners” who are “short-term visitors to a country who have no intention of staying with a specific task to perform (namely engaging in study) and particular opportunities for support (through the institution where they are enrolled)” (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007, p. 72). In addition, Statistics Canada defines international students as being: “students in Canada on a visa or refugees, neither of which have a permanent residency status in Canada” (2011). Differences among international students have been identified in terms of nationality,

race, ethnicity, cultural values, beliefs, cultural background, language, and physical appearance (Hanassab, 2006).

For the purpose of this study, Paige's definition of international students has been adopted as the main components of this definition—temporary status in the host country, permanent residency status in the country of citizenship, and educational purposes of staying in the host country—seem to clearly distinguish international students from students of the host culture (Paige, 1990).

Prevalence of International Students in Canada

In recent decades, the number of international students in Canadian institutions has increased. In the 1990s, Canada was one of the world's leading countries in welcoming international students (Chui, 1996). Since the early 2000s, enrolment of international students in Canada has increased to more than 100,000 students in total (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). The leading representatives of international students in Canada are from Asia, Europe, North America, Africa, South America, and Oceania respectively (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Other countries, such as the U.S. and Australia, have also witnessed an increase in the number of international students in recent years (Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007; Bradley et al., 1995; Olivas & Li, 2006; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2008). As cited in Hung (2010), students' attraction to study abroad can be attributed to: their perceptions of higher education quality; admissions opportunities; enhancing exposure to and familiarity with foreign societies and cultures, especially Western countries; possibilities of immigrating and residing in the host country upon graduation; and future career opportunities.

Challenges for University Students

University can be a stressful experience for both local and international students. For

example, students have to adapt to new educational and social settings, as well as deal with developmental factors such as financial independence and establishing one's identity (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007). The start of post-secondary education often coincides with a transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Kenney, 2007). For those students who are moving away for the first time, their successful adjustment to a new culture and environment depends, to an extent, on their ability to find similarities between their new life and their previous life, and involves connecting with people who share similar values as them (Kenney, 2007).

Although there is overlap between what international students and local students find challenging when pursuing university studies, according to Leong and Chou (2002) difficulties experienced by international students can be divided into three categories. First are concerns common to all students. International students share a lot of common difficulties with their local peers and are often dealing with the same adjustment challenges, such as starting post-secondary education, navigating the registration process, selecting appropriate courses for their program of study, adapting to the large classroom sizes, being away from home, residing with their peers, and being independent (Kenny, Aluede, & McEachern, 2009; Pederson, 1991a; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Second are concerns common to most sojourners. These problems include experiencing culture shock (Pederson, 1991a; Yakushko, Davidson, & Sanford-Martens, 2008), culture fatigue, role shock (Pederson, 1991a), financial difficulties, language barriers (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004), and loneliness (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Yakushko et al., 2008). Third are concerns that are related to experiences of being a visible minority from cultural or ethnic groups such as, but not limited to, international students (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004, p.127). These include experiences of various types of racism, prejudice, and discrimination.

While this categorization may help us understand what international students find

demanding and challenging, it should not be postulated that all international students are impacted by these difficulties in the same way (Arthur, 1997; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). In general, the adjustment process is more difficult and complex the greater the differences between the international students' own culture and the host culture (Arthur, 1997).

Besides the anticipated adaptation period, international students face other concerns that might create challenges in their experience as sojourners adapting to a new culture (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007). The following section explains in greater detail some common difficulties that are specific to international students.

International Students' Common Difficulties

There are a number of challenges that international students experience that are frequently cited in the literature. These challenges seem to fall within Leong and Chou's (2002) second and third categorizations mentioned above. While the following sections introduce the most common challenges that international students encounter as sojourners pursuing studies in Canada, these challenges presumably reflect, to a degree, the experiences of international students studying in universities around the globe. The challenges addressed below are adjustment to a new culture, language difficulties, financial difficulties, racial discrimination and prejudice, and lack of a social support network.

Adjustment to a new culture. Cultural adjustment is identified as one of the stressful problems faced by international students (Arthur, 1997; Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994; Olivas & Li, 2006; Russell et al., 2008). Some of the concerns that are linked to this problem include loneliness, lack of support, unpleasant experiences in the host country, and self-and family expectations that are unrealistic (Russell et al., 2008). Culture shock has been conceptualized as a learning period and an essential experience necessary in adjusting to a new culture (Popadiuk

& Arthur, 2004). More specifically, culture shock is defined as the process of adapting to change between the home country and the host culture (Arthur, 1997). Oberg (1960) explains the four stages of culture shock: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment.

According to this culture shock model and its U-shaped curve of adjustment, acculturation is explained in three phases: contact with the host culture, which involves the enthusiasm and curiosity about experiencing the new culture; conflict with the host culture, which refers to experiencing cultural difficulties and moving toward the bottom of the U-curve; and the adjustment period, which reflects the recovery stage and the ability to manage cultural difficulties in the host country (Arthur, 1997, 2010).

According to Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), culture shock can be explained in terms of a W-curve model, which is an extension of the U-curve model. This model explains international students' experience of a readjustment period when they return to their home country. There is also developing research suggesting that the U-curve and W-curve models do not adequately portray international students' experiences of adjustment (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004), yet these models have maintained their influence in counselling practices related to international students (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

Research also shows that the process of culture shock consists of intrapersonal issues that international students experience. These intrapersonal difficulties, such as loneliness, anxiety, depression, homesickness, loss of identity, sense of loss, feelings of doubt, insecurity, and inadequacy, are just several psychological problems studied in the literature (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

Language difficulties. Language inefficiency has been reported as the most difficult factor that international students deal with in their cross-cultural transition (Mori, 2000). In a

research study conducted by Yeh and Inose (2003), self-reported English inefficiency was identified as one of the predictors of acculturative distress, along with diminished social connectedness and support network satisfaction. According to the results of this study, more use of the host language, fluency level, and the participants' level of comfort speaking the language were linked to lower levels of international students' acculturative distress (Yeh & Inose, 2003). These researchers indicate that higher level of language efficiency could be related to more comfortable and confident interactions between the international students and the members of the host culture. Furthermore, higher level of English efficiency may allow international students to express themselves more, be less embarrassed with their accent or ethnic background, and display higher academic performance (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Therefore, language efficiency is important to consider since difficulties in this area have been shown to impact international students' psychological adjustment as well as their academic performance (Arthur, 2004; Dipeolu et al., 2007; Mori, 2000; Olivas & Li, 2006; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Financial difficulties. Various studies have also identified financial difficulties as one of the main challenges that international students encounter (Arthur, 1997; Dipeolu, et al., 2007; Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994; Komiya & Eells, 2001; Yi et al., 2003). Tuition fees and costs of living are approximately four times higher for international students than for domestic students (Arthur, 1997). In 2011, the average total tuition for international students pursuing an undergraduate degree in Canada was \$ 17,571 (Statistics Canada, 2011). When international students experience financial problems, they have a limited number of options to deal with their challenges (Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994). International students usually receive financial assistance through a foreign sponsor, their local government, or their family. Even though

international students may receive financial support from their families, it is unreasonable to presume that all international students are wealthy (Arthur, 1997, 2010). Unless employed on campus, international students, in accordance with immigration policies, are neither allowed to work nor are they eligible for the financial aid programs that are available to local students (Arthur, 1997; Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994).

Racial discrimination and prejudice. Racial discrimination is another problem that international students may face during their stay in the host country (Arthur, 2004; Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007; Hanassab, 2006; Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Although racial discrimination is more widely reported in the U.S. than in Canada, it is possible that international students experience similar racial discrimination and prejudice during their cross-cultural experience in Canada (Arthur, 2004). Upon their arrival to the host country, international students experience sudden change in their social status and come to recognize they are no longer part of the “majority race” (Arthur, 2004). The discrimination faced by international students is evident in the community, by employers, and educational institutions and their policies and curriculum (Arthur, 2004).

Different studies have demonstrated that international students feel stereotyped by their peers, university faculty and staff, and people in the community (Hanassab, 2006; Leong & Chou, 2002; Pederson, 1991). The findings from Hanassab’s (2006) research, which was conducted in Los Angeles, depicted international students from Southeast Asia, Africa, and Asia as experiencing the most amount of discrimination in their interactions with their professors. One student from Japan reported, “I get very frustrated if a professor ignores me because my English is not as good compared to a native speaker...such times I feel I’m stupid” (Hanassab, 2006, p. 162).

The findings from Hanassab's (2006) research revealed that in interactions with their classmates, international students from the Middle East, Asia, and Americas experienced the highest level of discrimination, while international students from Europe received the least amount of discrimination. One student from Iraq reported, "I accidentally bumped into a Caucasian guy and he mumbled f [expletive] immigrant!" Another student, from Costa Rica, expressed that "some classmates were saying that black comes in more shades of black, referring to me [Latino]" (Hanassab, 2006, p. 164). In addition, international students from the Middle East experienced the highest level of discrimination in the community, as opposed to the students from Oceania who did not believe that the people in the community expressed prejudice or discrimination toward them (Hanassab, 2006).

As with Hanassab's (2006) study, other studies have found racial discrimination to be one of the most significant problems international students face. Indeed, as cited in Barletta and Kobayashi (2007), international students who are visible minorities might experience more discrimination due to the colour of their skin. As a result, Hanassab heeds that it is essential for counsellors and educators to be aware of their own cultural values, as well as cultural diversity of their students and clients (2006).

Lack of a social support network. Social interaction with members of the host culture has been deemed important in helping international students adjust to their new environment. However, establishing such interactions has been reported to be infrequent and difficult (Rosenthal et al., 2007; Sandhu, 1994). In an Australian study, Rosenthal and his colleagues reported that international students establish more interactions with members of their own culture than they do with members of the host culture. In addition, these students tend to have fewer off-campus interactions with members of the host culture than they do at the university (2007). The

findings of this study demonstrate that international students from Asian countries interact more with people from their own culture than they do with Australians; however, the findings were different for students from non-Asian countries.

According to Berry (1997), international students who interact with students from both their own culture and the host culture tend to adapt to the new culture more effectively; however, those who limit themselves to interacting with individuals only from their own culture will have a more challenging adjustment experience. Social interaction has also been linked to international students' wellbeing. The results of this research suggest that improvement in students' sense of belonging and connectedness will empower their wellbeing in different aspects of their lives (Rosenthal et al., 2007).

The influence of social connectedness and having an established social support network has been researched elsewhere. Yeh and Inose (2003) investigated the influence of social support satisfaction, social connectedness, and English fluency in predicting acculturative distress among international students. They defined acculturative stress as "the distinctive type of stress associated with individuals' cross-cultural encounters, which can manifest in physical, social, and psychological problems" (p. 16). The sample of this study included 327 international undergraduate students from various regions of Asia, Europe, Central/Latin America, Africa, North America, and Oceania. The results indicated that social connectedness and social support network satisfaction were significantly related to predicting international students' acculturative distress. These researchers claimed that international students' close connections and social support networks are essential factors in helping them adjust to the new culture and deal with their stress.

In summary, a review of the literature suggests that international students face a wide

range of difficulties that are different than those of local students. It therefore stands to reason that international students may also have counselling needs and expectations unique to them.

This points to a need for counsellors at universities to obtain a better understanding of international students' counselling experiences to, in turn, provide services that are more meaningful, relevant, and culturally sensitive. The following section will review international students' utilization of university counselling services and their perceptions of counselling.

Utilization of University Counselling Services

With the growing presence of international students in universities, new challenges are created for counsellors and educators working at counselling services (Yeh & Inose, 2003). International students, like other post-secondary students, have counselling services available to them, such as personal, academic, and career counselling. Support programs may also be offered to help students identify and improve their skills to adjust to the new challenging environment, and help international students make their transition easier and more adaptable (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007).

There is concern that even though international students are at risk of experiencing adjustment difficulties and various mental health problems, they are believed to underutilize counselling services (Arthur, 2004; Bradley et al., 1995; Dipeolu et al., 2007; Komiya & Eells, 2001; Luzio-luckett, 1998; Morgan et al., 2003; Nilsson et al., 2004; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Raunic & Xenos, 2008; Russell et al., 2008; Seo, 2005; Yakushko et al., 2008; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Yi et al., 2003), find their counselling experience to be unsatisfactory (Arthur, 2004; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004), or terminate their counselling sessions prematurely (Arthur, 2004; Dipeolu et al., 2007; Mori, 2000; Yakushko et al., 2008). Reasons cited for international students' reluctance to use counselling services include cultural differences and beliefs regarding

mental health problems, low level of awareness of available services, stigma relating to using mental health services or seeking help from others (Raunic & Xenos, 2008; Seo, 2005; Yeh & Inose, 2003), low level of usage of such services in their home country (Seo, 2005), beliefs that their problems are not significant enough to seek the help of a counsellor, confidentiality concerns, feelings of awkwardness or discomfort when attending a session, and/or preference of solving one's problems rather than seeking help (Flisher et al., 2002; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

Other studies indicate that international students may seek out alternative ways to deal with their problems, such as seeking the help of their families or friends as opposed to utilizing the support services that are offered to them (Morgan et al., 2003; Olivas & Li, 2006; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Setiawan, 2006). To further this discussion, Dillard and Chislom (as cited in Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004) claim that international students are more reluctant to use counselling services if their own culture does not recognize the value of professional and support services; therefore, these students are more likely to seek the help of their family and friends instead.

In a narrative study conducted by Brinson and Kottler (1995), international students were asked to reflect on reasons why they did not seek counselling. Students spoke about adjustment difficulties and their perception of counselling. One student referred to counselling as a negative experience in which only "weak" or "bad" people would participate. Another student revealed that an "American" counsellor would not be able to relate to their problems and understand the cultural differences. Still other students admitted that they were not even aware of the existence of counselling services and did not know what counselling meant. It was concluded that even though international students faced various challenges, they were still not willing to seek the counselling and support services available to them. Therefore, Brinson and Kottler (1995) suggested that "it is utterly important for university counseling centers to market their services

more productively to the international student community” (p. 68).

In sum, even though it has been established that international students are prone to experiencing various difficulties upon arrival to, or during their stay in, the host culture, they tend to underutilize the counselling services available to them. This trend speaks to the importance of exploring international students’ views on services available to them. The following section explains different influences on international students’ decision-making when seeking counselling, as well as student views and expectations related to counselling and counsellors.

International Students’ Perceptions of Counselling

Perceptions of counselling influence, to a degree, one’s decision-making and expectations surrounding the counselling process (Setiawan, 2006; Zhang & Dixon, 2001). Various studies have explored international students’ decisions to seek counselling, as well as their views and expectations of counselling and of their counsellors.

Decisions to seek counselling. International students tend to hold a negative view of counselling (Nilsson et al., 2004). There has been extensive research investigating factors that influence international students’ perceptions of counselling and their decision to seek counselling. These factors have been grouped into three categories: personal, socio-cultural, and agency factors.

Personal factors. These factors include personal characteristics and situations that influence perceptions of counselling. International students’ decision to seek counselling may be inhibited due to their unwillingness to discuss problems with other people and their belief that they can solve their own problems (Setiawan, 2006).

Socio-cultural factors. There are several socio-cultural factors that have been found to

influence international students' decision to seek counselling, such as the counsellor's religion, gender, race, and ethnic background (Setiawan, 2006). One particular cultural value discussed at length in the literature that may contribute to reluctance to seek counselling is collectivism. Asian cultures, for instance, tend to exercise this value more so than European cultures (Fowler, Glenwright, Bhatia, & Drapeau, 2011; Setiawan, 2006). Persons from Asian cultures tend to conceal their emotions and deal with their sufferings in isolation, while those who do address their concerns overtly may be more inclined to seek help from family members than attend counselling (Fowler et al., 2011). According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), collectivism "stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (p. 399). Therefore, in a collectivist culture, people tend to be "dependent on their social group," which may elicit feelings of embarrassment, shame, and stigma towards counselling that ultimately impact their behaviours and attitudes towards seeking counselling (Setiawan, 2006, p. 404).

Agency factors. Lack of knowledge about the existence of counselling services, confidentiality concerns, counsellor ability to help, costs of services, and long wait times are agency factors that have been reported to impact decisions by international students to seek counselling services (Setiawan, 2006). Negative perceptions of counselling services' effectiveness and helpfulness as well as unfamiliarity with the counsellor are other factors that may deter international students from seeking help (Setiawan, 2006).

Views and expectations of counsellors and counselling. International students' satisfaction with counselling services may be closely related to their views of their counsellors (Arthur, 1997; Seo, 2005). Research suggests that international students' perceptions of the

counsellor influence their willingness to seek help and will determine whether or not these students will be satisfied with the help received (Arthur, 1997). International students' views of their counsellors range from perceiving the counsellor as a friend to viewing them as an expert. Mau and Jepsen (1988) state that international students who expect a formal counselling relationship tend to perceive counselling as a "directive, paternalistic, and authoritarian process" (p.192). Therefore, counsellors who assume a less direct counselling approach may be viewed as less helpful by international students who expect more direct counselling styles from their counsellors (Arthur, 1997).

Though the notion of the need for more direct and structured counselling with certain populations of international students is widespread (Bradley et al., 1995; Fowler et al., 2011), there are also a number of other findings that explain international students' expectations of their counsellors' roles and characteristics differently. In a study conducted in the U.S. by Yuen and Tinsley (1981), American students actually preferred the counsellor to be "less concrete, directive, empathic, nurturant, and expert", while expecting themselves to take an active role in the counselling process (p. 68). On the other hand, Chinese, African, and Iranian students would expect their counsellors to provide solutions to their problems and take the lead in the counselling process, while these students assume a more dependent role (Yuen & Tinsley, 1981). Similarly, in a study conducted by Fowler and colleagues (2011), compared to Caucasian Canadian students, East Asian students were found to take a less responsible role in counselling, and expected the counsellor to be expert and be more direct, empathic, and tolerant. In other words, East Asian students seemed to prefer that the counsellor take an authoritative position and provide solutions to their problems and concerns.

According to Yuen and Tinsley (1981), international students from Iran, Africa, and

China typically expect honesty, concreteness, expertise, directiveness, and immediacy from their counsellors. Other studies have indicated that international students do not necessarily prefer a more directive counselling style, and have called for more comprehensive and extensive research (Bradley et al., 1995). It has also been reported that African, Asian, and Mexican students would prefer a counsellor who is from a similar ethnic background (Gim, Atkinson, & Kim, 1991); while other researchers have indicated otherwise in that ethnicity does not play a significant role for international students in counselling (as cited in Bradley et al., 1995).

In addition to international students' preferences about counsellor ethnicity, earlier studies have emphasized preference regarding counsellor gender. African students tend to prefer their counsellor to be of the opposite gender (Atkinson, Furlong, & Poston, 1986), while Asian and Mexican students would prefer their counsellors to be of the same gender (Atkinson, Poston, & Furlong, 1989).

Although there are mixed findings and no clear-cut uniformity with regard to counsellor preferences among international students, preferences nevertheless appear to be of importance for some students in some contexts.

The following section presents some of the counselling theories and approaches that have been suggested for working with international students. Special attention will be given to the importance of competencies in multicultural counselling.

Theoretical Approaches to Counselling International Students

According to Pederson (1991a), "research on counselling international students has been characterized by isolated, uncoordinated, and fragmentary studies on specialized variables, with no clear application of results to comprehensive theory building or to practical implications for institutional policy" (p. 50). The goals of research focusing on international students have not

been clearly explained or defined in the literature, rendering theoretical approaches and frameworks related to counselling with this population difficult to confirm or justify (Pederson, 1991a).

Furthermore, there is a growing debate amongst researchers about finding the best and most efficient ways to help international students. However, there seems to be agreement that Western counselling models may not be the most suitable approach to address the counselling needs of international students (Bradley et al., 1995). A review of the counselling literature reveals that there has not been an extensive attempt to apply the current theoretical perspectives to the adjustment process of international students (Pederson, 1991a). The development of theories has been inhibited due to an accentuation of the underlying adaptation problems without examining and investigating the adaptation process first (Pederson, 1991a). On a general level, “person-centred theories” have been utilized to further explore the importance of “changing the person,” while “situation-centered theories” have emphasized the significance of “changing the situation” (Pederson, 1991a, p. 11).

There are also other perspectives that have emphasized the role of culture and the importance of cultural means for creating change (Natasi, 1998). Examples of culturally-focused perspectives that can be extended to counselling international students are offered next, namely Collins and Arthur’s (2010a) culture-infused approach, Zhou et al.’s (2008) theories of intercultural contact, and multicultural counselling competencies.

Culture-infused approach. There has been much advocacy in the literature for multicultural counselling stemming from a belief that all counselling is multicultural. As cited by Canadian researchers Collins and Arthur (2010a), “culture must be located at the centre of all work with clients” (p. 204). They argue that “there should be no distinction between

multicultural competence and professional competence” (Collins & Arthur, 2010a, p. 204).

Consequently, counsellors are advised to incorporate culture in their work with all clients and appreciate and respect clients’ cultural background and experiences (Collins & Arthur, 2010b).

This culture-infused approach to counselling lends further support for balance between emic and etic perspectives when working with clients (Arthur & Collins, 2010). The integrated emic-etic approach is adopted as a conceptual framework for the current study and introduced further below.

Theories of intercultural contact. Zhou and colleagues (2008) present some seminal and invaluable contributions to understanding the emotional, behavioural, and cognitive elements of international students’ adaptation process. They describe three contemporary theories of intercultural contact: (a) stress and coping theory, which focuses on affect; (b) culture learning theory, which focuses on behaviour; and (c) social identification theory, which focuses on cognition (Zhou et al., 2008). These theories offer ways of describing international students’ experience of adjustment and conceptualizing counselling interventions.

Stress and coping theory. Stress and coping theory focuses primarily on psychological wellbeing and the emotional element of adjustment (Zhou et al., 2008). According to this theory, people who travel across cultures need to be able to develop coping strategies. Personality or situational factors, such as the level of life changes or the extent of social support, can influence the adjustment process (Zhou et al., 2008). Proponents of stress and coping theory recommend that sojourners expand their social support by communicating with both their co-nationals and the locals which, in effect, will improve psychological health and decrease homesickness when persons are adjusting to a new culture (Zhou et al., 2008). Interventions based on stress and coping theory include assisting international students to develop stress management and coping

skills (Zhou et al., 2008)

Culture learning theory. Culture learning theory originated from social and experimental psychology. Its main focus is on cross-cultural behaviours and social skills that are essential for adapting to a new culture (Ward & Searle, 1991; Zhou et al., 2008). Based on this theory, the process of adaptation is impacted by knowledge about the new culture (Ward & Searle, 1991; Zhou et al., 2008), length of stay in the host culture, language efficiency, social support from and contact with the host nation, development of cultural identity, and cross-cultural training (Zhou et al., 2008).

According to the literature, in terms of behavioural adaptation in a social context, international students typically belong to three different friendship networks: mono-cultural, bi-cultural, and multi-cultural friendship networks (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Zhou et al., 2008). In a mono-cultural friendship network, sojourners uphold their original cultural values by maintaining contact with people of their home country while living in the host country. In a bi-cultural friendship network, international students may have interactions with their co-nationals as well as people from the host culture, such as friends, teachers, and/or counsellors. Through these interactions, international students are able to learn relevant social and cultural skills that will, in turn, help them academically (Zhou et al., 2008). In a multi-cultural friendship network, international students build friendships with sojourners from other countries, which allow them to expand their social network and get involved in social activities (Zhou et al., 2008).

The type of friendship network sojourners engage in is important since, according to culture learning theory, interaction with people from the host culture benefits international students both psychologically and academically. It has also been suggested that interaction with the locals benefits international students emotionally and alleviates their stress level, which helps

students experience better psychological adaptation (Zhou et al., 2008). Some interventions recommended by culture learning theory include programs that assist international students with culture-informed social skills and behavioural trainings (Zhou et al., 2008).

Social identification theory. In general, social identification theory is derived from social psychology and identifies cognitive factors as the most significant component of the adjustment process (Zhou et al., 2008). According to social identification theory, people travelling to other countries view themselves in a larger surrounding, like “little fish in big ponds,” which in turn can cause anxiety and change their views of themselves and their identities (Zhou et al., 2008, p. 67).

The cognitive aspects of cultural adaptation for international students have focused on inter-group views and interactions of sojourners. During the adaptation period, many students experience or perceive prejudice and discrimination in their encounters with locals. Counsellors applying the social identification theory recommend interventions such as improving self-esteem and focusing on within group similarities (Zhou et al., 2008).

Multicultural counselling competency. A review of the literature confirms the significance of culture in counselling practices. In fact, there are viewpoints that indicate that all client encounters are multicultural in nature (Collins & Arthur, 2007). Multicultural counselling is considered the “fourth force” after psychodynamic, behavioural, and humanistic approaches in counselling (Pederson, 1991b). The importance of counsellors’ knowledge of and appreciation for other countries, as well as the cultural values and beliefs of their citizens has been emphasized in the literature (Zhang & Dixon, 2001). When counselling international students, it has been recommended that counsellors “respect international students’ values, be willing to learn with and from international student clients, and show genuine concern for international

students” (Zhang & Dixon, 2001, p. 254).

Furthermore, counsellors need to be aware of cultural differences and acquire “culture-specific knowledge” when counselling international students (Zhang & Dixon, 2001, p. 254). The multicultural competency of counsellors influences international students’ views of the counsellors and the counsellor’s expertise, honesty, and credibility (Zhang & Dixon, 2001). Collins and Arthur (2007) have developed a multicultural competency framework that helps counsellors to increase cultural sensitivity in their work. The framework includes three multicultural competency domains: (a) cultural awareness of self, (b) cultural awareness of others, and (c) culturally sensitive working alliance (Collins & Arthur, 2007, p. 33).

According to the first domain of the multicultural competency framework, it is essential for counsellors to be aware of their own cultural and personal beliefs, values, assumptions, and identities. The second domain emphasizes the importance of understanding the cultural beliefs and values of the client, and the relationship between their culture and their emotional and psychological health. The third domain focuses on developing a culturally respectful and sensitive relationship between counsellor and client. This domain addresses the significance of establishing culturally responsive goals while working with the client (Collins & Arthur, 2007). Furthermore, according to Nelson-Jones (2002), counsellors’ cultural capability and competency are specifically applicable to their work with international students who are temporarily residing in a new country. Some of the goals of multicultural counselling with international students are identified as follows: (a) establishing support, (b) coping with post-traumatic stress, (c) assisting acculturation and assimilation, (d) avoiding further marginalization, and (e) addressing cultural and racial discrimination (Nelson-Jones, 2002). As our world becomes more interconnected, multicultural counselling and its relevant goals also become more significant.

Conceptual Framework: Integrated Etic-Emic Approach

It appears from the review of the literature that international students' experiences are varied and complex, as may be their counselling needs and expectations. This complexity is reflected in Pederson's observation that "isolated, uncoordinated, and fragmentary studies focusing on specialized variables" have yet to yield clear or meaningful applications in cross-cultural counselling (1991a, p. 50). Perhaps Collins and Arthur (2010) begin to address this complexity by forefronting the pervasiveness of culture and the importance of cultural responsiveness in any and all counselling practice. Recognizing these caveats, the current study applies the integrated etic-emic approach as a conceptual framework to help understand, and make meaning from, the cross-cultural counselling experiences of international students.

In cross-cultural counselling, acknowledging both etic and emic perspectives is found to be essential. The emic (culture-specific) perspective—arguably the more traditional understanding of "culture"—endorses the view that culture is defined largely, if not solely, by race or ethnicity. This culture-specific approach focuses on "the uniqueness of each cultural group" (Arthur & Collins, 2010, p. 20). In practice, to be culturally responsive, a counsellor would need to possess knowledge of various ethnic groups as understood through commonalities observed within the cultural group of which the client is a member (Schulz, Sheppard, Lehr, & Shepard, 2006).

Acknowledging that there is greater variation within cultural groups defined by ethnicity than across groups, the discourse on multiculturalism increasingly considers other factors or "identities", such as gender, sexual orientation, and religion to name but a few, that may shape one's reality. This etic (universal) perspective therefore endorses a more inclusive definition of culture beyond consideration of racial or ethnic factors alone (Arthur & Collins, 2010) and

promotes a subjective understanding of culture given multiple intersecting identities. When applying this perspective, rather than assuming certain pre-determined knowledge based on group membership, a counsellor might invite the client to name prominent identities, alongside ethnicity, that are a part of their reality and explore how their presenting issue can be understood through these intersecting identities.

To reconcile the etic-emic dichotomy, Lee (1984) has suggested that “every culture is like other cultures in some ways, like some others in other respects, and finally, like no others” (p. 594), which addresses the benefits of a balanced approach for counsellors working with clients from other cultures. In a similar vein, it has been suggested that an “integrated etic-emic” approach allows for individual attributes, characteristics, values, and norms of each member of a culture to be maintained, while also appreciating cultural values and beliefs associated with group membership (Varjas, Nastasi, Moore, & Jayasena, 2005, p. 243). The onus then would be on counsellors to establish and maintain awareness of the extent to which they endorse the two perspectives. Doing so would be important since a counsellor’s understanding of each perspective, the position they assume, and their awareness of the clients’ cultural values, as well as of their own, can influence their interpretation and practice of multicultural counselling (Arthur & Collins, 2010).

Rationale for the Current Study

The international student population in Canada has increased in recent decades, and a review of the literature reveals challenges that these students face during their stay in the host country. In addition, international students’ coping strategies, access to services, and familiarity With available resources may be limited (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Even though it has been suggested that the challenges that local and international students experience might be similar,

there are still difficulties that are unique to international students. Overall, international students tend to hold a negative view towards counselling, and their decision to seek these services is strongly influenced by personal, socio-cultural, or agency factors. Negative views contribute to the underutilization of counselling services available, despite the fact that many international students experience adjustment difficulties. When they do use such services, it often results in early termination or an unsatisfactory experience.

Most studies related to international students have either utilized quantitative methods (Bradley et al., 1995; Flisher, et al., 2002; Morgan, et al., 2003; Nilsson, et al., 2004; Setiawan, 2006; Rosenthal, et al., 2007, 2008) or mixed methods (Setiawan, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003). A number of researchers have specifically addressed the limitations of using quantitative approaches while studying international students. For example, in a study conducted by Morgan and her colleagues (2003), students' help-seeking behaviours by gender, racial background, and social status were examined. One of the limitations of their study was the use of self-report measures. They concluded that the interpretation of the results was limited because they were not clear whether or not their participants entirely comprehended the questionnaire items (Morgan et al., 2003). As a result, in the current study, considering potential language difficulties, it is more appropriate to apply a method in which participants are able to freely express themselves and researchers have the opportunity to clarify and explain their questions (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, in quantitative studies, such as surveys, international students are represented as a "homogenous group" (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004, p. 128). Sample homogeneity has been critiqued as one of the main limitations of quantitative studies (Arthur, 1997; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007), with a major concern being that international students become "categorized" at the expense of their unique needs. Concerns related to their transition phase may also not be

attended to appropriately (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Furthermore, gender, culture, and power are disregarded when international students are viewed as a homogenous group, thus putting these students at risk of becoming even more marginalized within the host culture (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

Thus far, the research on international students varies and appears to be fragmented with conflicting results. This type of research has also been predominantly conducted in the U.S. and Australia. Even though the population of international students in Canada has increased in recent decades, the number of Canadian studies focusing on international students is limited. Given conflicting results from qualitative studies and the shortage of relevant research in Canada, it is essential to learn more about international students' experience and to acquire such information in meaningful ways. One way to achieve this is to privilege the voice of international students using a qualitative approach and ask them about their counselling experience, which is what this study aimed to do.

Specific Aims and Research Questions

The main question posed in this study was "What are international students' experiences of counselling?" More specifically, I aimed to better understand how international students might experience: (a) circumstances leading up to counselling, (b) engaging in the counselling process, (c) the counsellor and the therapeutic relationship, and (d) termination and post-termination. Lastly, I sought recommendations that international students might offer counsellors to foster more positive counselling experience.

CHAPTER III

Method

Qualitative Methodology

Cross-cultural research has been defined as “research conducted by a member(s) of a dominant cultural group with and about members of a non-dominant cultural group(s)” (Offet Gartner, 2010, p. 210). Indeed, conducting research may be considered cross-cultural in nature due to presence of various cultural factors (Offet-Garner, 2010). This observation necessitates a culture-infused approach to research, defined as “a means of recognizing the centrality of culture in research endeavours and ensuring that each step in the research process is reflective of and responsive to the cultural identities and experiences of all stakeholders in the process: researchers, participants...” (Offet-Gartner, 2010, p. 216).

In conducting cross-cultural research, qualitative or descriptive research methods—in contrast to experimental or quantitative methods—have been highly recommended (Goodman, Liang, Helms, Latta, Sparks, & Weintraub, 2004; Osborne, 1990; Ponterotto, Kuriakose, & Granovskaya, 2008) due to their experiential and flexible aspects (Osborne, 1990). Descriptive methodologies, such as phenomenology, attempt to stay true to the nature of the participants’ lived-experiences. In fact, phenomenological research methods allow researchers to investigate aspects of participants’ experiences that may be neglected in quantitative methods (Osborne, 1990). In this type of research, the term “participant” or “co-researcher” is used to emphasize the voluntary and collaborative nature of the research (Osborne, 1990).

A review of the literature suggests that qualitative methods can speak to social unfairness, give rise to action plans (Goodman et al, 2004), and are exploratory (Offet-Gartner, 2010). Culturally sensitive researchers appreciate qualitative methods for their ability to depict the lived

experience of the participants, provide meanings to those experiences, and consequently inform appropriate services (Fleras, 2004; Goodman et al., 2004; Offet-Gartner, 2010).

For the purpose of this study, I chose a phenomenological qualitative approach. Phenomenology is grounded in disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, and education. This approach can be used to study human experience as a whole with the main focus of unveiling experiences related to a specific phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Osborne, 1990). Put another way, “phenomenology thematizes the phenomenon of consciousness, and, in its most comprehensive sense, it refers to the totality of lived experiences that belong to a single person” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 236).

Wertz (2005) describes a phenomenon as a key concept or a psychological topic of interest that: (a) is identifiable, (b) has a presence in the “lived-world” that can be located and delineated, and (c) can be experienced by multiple people. The key concept is of interest as it is believed to require qualitative knowledge to better understand how it is experienced in the lived-world. The researcher begins the study by identifying a phenomenon that could be illuminated by those who have lived in. For this study, phenomenology was used to help broaden our understanding of international students’ experience of counselling in a university setting.

The unveiling of lived experience related to a phenomenon occurs through formal or informal conversations or interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Conducting interviews can allow for flexibility to align with the unique needs of a participant for their full participation, while simultaneously staying true to the aim of the study (Osborne, 1990). For example, flexible interviewing can accommodate for language or comprehension difficulties among international students who come from a wide range of backgrounds. With a phenomenological approach, researchers also aim to unveil essential aspects of the phenomenon under study, while mindfully

attempting to not impose any pre-determined view of the phenomenon. This may be done through bracketing experiences, values, and beliefs related to the phenomenon to generate self-awareness in service of enhancing the researcher's ability to suspend any pre-determined views during the interview (Osborne, 1990). Doing so may avoid imposing culturally encapsulated meanings onto the experiences offered by the participant. In other words, both flexible interviewing and suspending pre-determined views can help create the necessary space that increases the likelihood for the fullest expression of participants' experiences and unveiling relevant cultural meanings.

The phenomenological approach used in this study differs from other qualitative approaches, such as narrative study, ethnography, case study, and grounded theory (Creswell, 2007), as it focuses on "the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). Phenomenology attempts to "remain as faithful as possible to the phenomenon and to the context in which it appears in the world" (Smith, 2008, p. 28). Through phenomenological research, the inquirer tries to "understand more adequately the human condition as it manifests itself in lived, concrete, experience" (Spinelli, 2005, p. 131). To this end, the researcher gathers the data and provides a detailed and elaborate description of the experienced phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). A detailed account of steps taken for this particular study is provided in the Procedure section. The final composition of phenomenological study reveals what the participants experienced and how it was experienced, as well as creates opportunity to reveal important commonalities and differences in experiences across participants (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate for a detailed exploration of international students and their lived experiences related to receiving counselling.

Participant Sample

In order to enhance the credibility of the study, participants needed to be “experienced and knowledgeable” in the topic of study and represent various viewpoints (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 64). Criterion sampling was used to ensure that all participants had experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Osborne, 1990). In the case of this study, participants had to have received counselling in a university setting while an international student. A benefit of criterion sampling is that participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under study could provide information that “may reveal major system weaknesses that become targets of opportunity for program or system improvement” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). Thus, criterion sampling seemed well suited to the goal of potentially revealing systemic influences that contribute to international student’s underutilization or negative experiences of counselling services, and point to opportunities for systemic change.

In addition to being an international student, the selection criteria for participation in this study were as follows. The student: (a) came to Canada to pursue university studies, (b) attended counselling in a university counselling setting in Canada, (c) completed counselling within the past 12 months, and (d) was 18 years of age or older. There were no restrictions on the participants’ home country, presenting issue that brought them to counselling, or duration of the counselling.

According to Patton (2002), “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (p. 244). However, sample size depends on the purpose of the study, the focus of the research and the researcher, the usefulness and credibility of the data, and the time and resources available to the researcher (Patton, 1990, 2002). In comparison with quantitative research, the sample size in qualitative research may appear smaller because the purpose of sampling is not to generalize the

results; rather it is to obtain rich, valuable, and in-depth information by exploring people's experience of a phenomenon (Chenail, 2002; Patton, 1990, 2002). It is not always a simple task to determine an exact number of participants before starting the research and analyzing the data. At times, a detailed and thorough representation of one individual's experiences is enough to accomplish the goals of research (Wertz, 2005). Various sources recommend different sample sizes in phenomenological studies, ranging from three to ten participants (Creswell, 2007; Sandelowski, 1995). Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (as cited in Morrow, 2005), suggest that "although not a formal methodological rule, the situational diversity necessary for identifying thematic patterns is often provided by three to five interview transcripts" (p. 255).

Instruments

Data collection in this study included administering a demographic questionnaire and face-to-face interviews using semi-structured interview protocol. These two instruments are described below.

Demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) included items such as age, gender, marital status, ethnic background, student status, program of study, year of study, level of education upon arrival in Canada, and length of stay in Canada. Additional information was sought to provide a more in-depth understanding of the participants' background prior to counselling. This information included history of seeking and receiving counselling services in a university setting in Canada and/or counselling services in the home country, decision to study in Canada, experiences in Canada to date, challenges faced, the impact of those challenges on adjustment process, ways of dealing with challenges, and decision and reason for initiating counselling.

Semi-structured interview protocol. In qualitative research, collecting data through

interviews allows the researcher to capture the participants' lived experiences related to the phenomenon under study and understand key elements of the phenomenon (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This can be done by inviting participants to provide information and elaborate their views and opinions on the phenomenon. Face-to-face interviews also provide the researcher with an opportunity to observe their participants' behaviours while receiving responses to their interview questions (Robson, 2002). Different interview formats afford the researcher to a range of "flexible and adaptable" ways of finding out new things (Robson, 2002, p. 272), and varying degrees of control over the course of the interview and the questions that are being asked (Creswell, 2009).

For the purpose of this study, a semi-structured interview approach, rather than an open-ended interview approach, was used to gather descriptions of the interviewee's lived experiences. In open-ended interviews, participants can provide as much detail and elaborate their responses as desired; therefore, "it can be quite difficult for researchers to extract similar themes or codes from the interview transcripts as they would with less open-ended responses" (Turner III, 2010, p. 756).

In a semi-structured interview, the researcher has a certain number of "focused" questions that have been determined prior to the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4). The wording of the questions and/or their order might change according to the interviewer's perception of the interview based on how the participant is responding (Robson, 2002). In addition, due to the flexibility of this type of interview, if questions are deemed to be inappropriate, they can be changed or omitted and new questions can be added (Robson, 2002).

As cited in Rapley (2001), in a study that applied semi-structured interviews, this style of interviewing "minimised the extent to which respondents had to express themselves in terms

defined by the interviewers and encouraged them to raise issues that were important to them. It was thus particularly well suited to attempt to discover respondents' own meanings and interpretations" (p. 306). While an open-ended format may have been effective in discovering international students' own meanings and interpretations related to their counselling experience, a semi-structured approach: (a) ensured a general focus on elements that may comprise the phenomenon (e.g., expectations of counselling/counsellor, therapeutic relationship); (b) offered opportunity to verify whether certain experiences presented in the literature and previous research were part of the participants' experiences; and (c) provided support through minimal guidance for participants experiencing a language barrier.

The researcher used the interview questions displayed in Appendix B to capture the participants' experience of counselling in a university setting. The questions were derived from the literature and tested through a pilot study. The interview questions one, four, five, six, seven, and 18 to 20 were generated to solicit international students' views and expectations of counselling and the therapeutic relationship. These questions are inspired by the counselling literature that indicates that, generally, international students' experience of counselling tends to be unsatisfactory or negative and their satisfaction with counselling is closely related to their views of their counsellors (Arthur, 1997, 2004; Nilsson et al., 2004; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Seo, 2005).

The interview questions two and three focused on international students' decisions to seek counselling. These questions are grounded in the literature that suggests that there are factors that influence international students' decisions to seek counselling and contribute to student reluctance to seek counselling (Flisher et al., 2002; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Raunic & Xenos, 2008; Seo, 2005; Setiawan, 2006; Yakushko et al., 2008; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

The interview questions eight to 17 are inspired from the literature that describes international students' views and expectations of their counsellors. According to the literature, even though a more direct and structured counselling style has been suggested for counselling with international students, there are other studies that indicate that international students do not prefer a more directive counselling style (Bradley et al., 1995). Since the findings are mixed, it is important to become informed about international students' views, expectations, and preferences regarding their counsellors.

The interview questions 21 to 30 focused on international students' post-counselling experiences. While not grounded in the literature, these questions represent a natural extension or progression of the phenomenon under study. Even though the literature depicts little about experiences after counselling, it was worth asking on that basis alone, and to get a well-rounded and more complete view of international students' experiences from pre- to post-counselling.

Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board prior to conducting the study. Potential participants were recruited from two universities in eastern Canada and appropriate ethics approval was sought and obtained in both cases. The recruitment texts (Appendices C & D) were distributed through: (a) advertisements in university newspapers; (b) on campus postings, such as in campus buildings and residences, student counselling services, International Students' Office, and student clubs; (c) social media, such as Facebook pages of students' associations and clubs; and (d) various faculties' email distribution lists. Recruitment lasted nine months and was discontinued once the minimum number of participants was reached.

The participants were recruited from the approximately 5,500 international students at

two universities who were enrolled during the 2011-2012 academic year. Participants who expressed interest were contacted via email or phone, according to their preference, and were selected if they met the study criteria. A study description (Appendix E) and a copy of the consent form (Appendix F) were emailed to each participant who expressed interest and met the criteria. Written informed consent was obtained prior to beginning the interview. At the start of the interview, the researcher provided the participants with the opportunity to read the consent form, ask questions, or express concerns regarding their participation. Participation was completely voluntary and participants were free to withdraw their involvement at any time during the study.

Participants were then invited to complete the demographic questionnaire, where the researcher asked them the questions and recorded their responses. The interviews were audio-recorded and ranged from one hour to ninety minutes in duration. Each interview session began with the general question of “What were your understandings/expectations about counselling prior to going in?” This question allowed the participant to start the interview by reflecting back on their most recent counselling experience and their understanding of counselling, and to subsequently “build up” to recollections of their actual experience of counselling.

The researcher transcribed each recorded interview for analysis. Data analysis, which is described in detail further below, included the generation of a descriptive summary of each participant’s counselling experience that captured main points and topics reflected in their interview. Following the interview, participants were provided descriptive summaries for review and asked to notify the researcher if they noticed any aspect of the summary that did not resonate with them or that they wished to have changed or omitted. In such a case, the participant would be provided with an opportunity to meet again with the researcher to discuss the summary. While

the researcher invited all three participants to review their respective descriptive summary, only two of the participants were successfully reached and able to review the summary of their interviews. Both participants (by pseudonyms of Ava and Hasti) indicated they felt the summary captured their experiences well and did not offer any changes. Consequently, no subsequent meetings were required.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis for this study was completed using guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data based on Creswell (2007) and Hycner (1985). A within-person analysis was first conducted for each participant interview, followed by a between-person analysis.

Within-person analysis. For the within-person analysis, each transcribed interview was analyzed in the following manner where the researcher:

- (a) Read the transcript multiple times and listened to the interview to understand the sense of the entire interview;
- (b) Developed a list of general significant statements by “getting at the essence of the meaning expressed in a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, or significant non-verbal communication” (Hycner, 1985, p. 282). In generating the general significant statements, the researcher used as much of the participant’s words and phrases as possible. The statements resulting from this step are referred to as the “units of *general* meaning.” At this point, the extent to which the units of general meaning addressed the research questions is not yet determined;
- (c) Developed a list of relevant units of meaning that addressed the research questions. In this step the researcher applied the research question to each unit of general meaning “to

determine what the participant has said that responds to and illuminates the research question” (Hycner, 1985, p. 284). Units of general meaning that were relevant to the research questions were noted as “units of *relevant* meaning.” However, if a unit of general meaning did not address the research questions, it was not included for further analysis;

- (d) Verified the units of relevant meaning with the help of an auditor (i.e., researcher’s thesis advisor) and eliminated redundancies among units of relevant meaning;
- (e) Wrote a descriptive summary of each participant interview. The units of relevant meaning generated in the previous step were used to guide which aspects of the participant experience related to the phenomenon to include in the summary. Summaries ranged from three to four pages in length, and included participants’ description of the phenomenon, direct quotes from the interview, as well as circumstances in which the phenomenon was experienced. The summary provided a more “polished” version of the transcript by reducing redundancies and organizing participant experiences into a coherent narrative with a temporal flow;
- (f) Conducted a member check by providing participants with their respective descriptive summary for review and making necessary changes to the summary based on participants’ feedback. This step served primarily as a measure of trustworthiness that assisted the researcher with the subsequent thematic analysis as well as indirectly validated the units of relevant meaning on which the summaries were based;
- (g) Examined all units of relevant meaning for each participant to determine if any of the units “naturally cluster together.” In other words, the researcher determined if there was an “essence” that united units of relevant meaning. If there were several units of meaning

that reflected the same meaning, they were grouped together to form a cluster of meaning (Hycner, 1985, p. 287); and

- (h) Examined all the clusters of meaning for each participant “to determine if there is one or more central themes which expresses the essence of these clusters” (Hycner, 1985, p. 290). Groupings of clusters of meaning became themes (Wertz, 2005).

Between-person analysis. Once the above steps were repeated for all three interviews, the researcher began the between-person analysis. This step involved discovering common and specific themes across participants, which expressed the essence of the phenomenon. During this step, the researcher:

- (a) Compared the themes across all three participants through an iterative process to identify common themes. A theme was considered “common” if it emerged within two or all three participant interviews. When a theme resonated with more than one participant’s experience, the clusters of meaning associated with the theme for each participant were merged together. Thus, a theme encompassed all clusters of meaning associated with it across respective participants;
- (b) Compared the themes across all three participants through an iterative process to identify specific themes. A theme was considered “specific” if it emerged from only one participant’s interview. When a theme resonated with only one participant’s experience, the theme encompassed all clusters of meaning associated with that participant; and
- (c) Verified the common and specific themes with the help of an auditor (i.e., researcher’s thesis advisor).

Validity and Trustworthiness Measures

According to Sandelowski (1993), the topic of validity in qualitative research should not

be attributed to “value” or “truth,” rather it relates to trustworthiness, which “becomes a matter of persuasion whereby the scientist is viewed as having made those practices visible and, therefore, auditable” (p. 2). Trustworthiness “is less a matter of claiming to be right about a phenomenon than of having good practices” (Sandelowski, 1993, p. 2). In qualitative research, validity hinges on the extent to which the findings are perceived as “truthfully” characterizing or describing the phenomenon under study (Hycner, 1985). Validity strengthens the qualitative research and reflects resonance of the findings based on the viewpoints of the researcher, the participants, and the readers of the study (Creswell, 2009). Even though validity is difficult to establish, in the present study the researcher attempted to increase the validity of the results by taking the following trustworthiness measures:

- (a) Bracketing: It is important to distinguish and clarify the assumptions and leanings that the researcher brings to the study, and which may influence the analysis of data. Bracketing prior to conducting the study allowed the researcher to comment on her past experiences and invited reflexivity to how her culture, gender, biases, and previous experiences may influence her interpretations of the results (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Osborne, 1990). The researcher’s reflections are provided in Appendix G;
- (b) Ongoing research journaling: To further enhance reflexivity, the researcher kept a journal to record her experiences, reactions, encounters, predispositions, challenges, or any assumptions as the research process unfolded. The researcher’s self-awareness findings were considered and included in the data analysis (Morrow, 2005);
- (c) Member check (Osborne, 1990; Shenton, 2004; Silverman, 2006): The participants are most knowledgeable about their experiences and consequently well positioned to validate the findings of the study. In this study, the researcher returned to the participants with a

descriptive summary of their respective interviews to verify the extent to which the researcher's understanding resonated with the experiences shared by each participant (Silverman, 2006); and

- (d) Audit: To improve the validity of the results, input from the auditor was considered during analysis of transcripts and incorporated into the results through a consensual process. The auditor acted as the “devil’s advocate,” asking the researcher questions about the methods, interpretations, themes, and meanings generated, thus keeping the researcher “honest” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). In this study, the auditor was the researcher’s thesis advisor.

CHAPTER IV

Results

This chapter begins with demographic information about the participants followed by a detailed descriptive summary of each participant’s unique counselling experience. Following these “narratives” is the thematic analysis, which includes comparing and contrasting counselling experiences across participants along four dimensions.

Participants

Participants in the present study included two female students and one male student who ranged from 25 to 29 years of age ($M=26.33$, $SD=2.30$). Two participants, who chose the pseudonyms “Ava” and “Hasti”, identified their home country as Iran, and one participant, “Sam,” is from Mexico. Ava and Hasti are married and identified Farsi as their native language and English as their second language. Sam is single and reported Spanish as his native language and French as his second language. At the time of the study, the two female participants were graduate students and had education and training in the field of counselling; the male participant

was an undergraduate student. The number of years that participants had been living in Canada ranged from five to nine ($M=6.33$, $SD=2.30$). Upon arrival in Canada, all participants held a high school diploma and presented furthering their education as the main reason for coming to Canada.

Descriptive Summaries

The following section presents a detailed description of each participant's counselling experience based on his or her respective interview and the within-person analysis. Based on the units of relevant meaning from the within-person analysis, each summary generally depicts how the participants decided to seek counselling, issues presented in counselling, expectations and perceived effectiveness of counselling, the therapeutic relationship, perceptions of culture in counselling, perceptions of the counselling process, and termination and future counselling. Summaries include verbatim excerpts from the transcribed interviews to provide rich and meaningful descriptions of the participants' counselling experiences in a university setting. Pseudonyms are used to ensure the participants' anonymity. Lastly, as a measure of trustworthiness, the researcher invited all three participants to read their respective summaries, provide feedback, and suggest any changes that they felt would better reflect their experiences. Ava and Hasti were able to review their respective summaries, whereas the researcher was unable to reach the third participant, Sam. Both Ava and Hasti indicated they felt the descriptive summary reflected their counselling experiences well and did not offer any suggestions for changes.

Ava: "You don't even know where Iran is. How am I supposed to tell you the rest?"

Ava is a 29-year-old married female student from Iran who has lived in Canada as an international student since 2003. Ava is a graduate student who came to Canada after completing

high school to pursue her university studies. She had previous counselling experiences both in Canada and in her home country, Iran. Upon her arrival in Canada, Ava faced various adjustment difficulties, such as feelings of homesickness and indecisiveness about choosing a program of study, feelings of sadness, language difficulties, financial challenges, lack of institutional support, discrimination, and transitional depression. These challenges impacted her significantly and delayed her education to the extent that she had to withdraw from her university studies for one semester.

Ava explained that she had had various counsellors with different ethnicities during her stay in Canada. She felt comfortable with her previous counsellors and believed them to be helpful as a result of their self-disclosures and their therapeutic relationship. Due to her previous counselling experiences and her understandings of counselling and therapy, Ava was open to receiving and attending counselling. She explained her decision about seeking counselling: “I knew there is nothing I can do about it [the presenting issue], or my friends can do about it. I mean there is only so much my friends could do about it, and I wanted professional help.” Ava believed that counselling was “not about giving advice,” yet it was “a place to be understood and listened to.” She expected to feel better and be able to adjust to her situation after having attended counselling. Ava also presented her expectations related to counsellor style. For instance, she expected a more emotion-focused counselling approach as opposed to a cognitive-based approach.

To help with her transitional challenges and difficulties that she was faced with at the time, Ava decided to seek counselling while attending university. Her family, friends, and previous counsellor in Canada were supportive of her decision to seek counselling. In fact, her recent positive counselling experience at a university counselling services significantly

influenced her decision to pursue a career in helping profession. Ava reported that counselling was very “supportive” and “very helpful” in fulfilling the goals that she had brought in the first session. In reference to counselling, she explained:

It assisted me a lot... I had a goal and the goal was to get through the school with success. It helped me a lot with that, to a point that I decided that I want to become [a] counsellor and give that gift to others, and I am very happy about that. So, it was a great experience in overall picture with all the obstacles that happened.

Ava also found that counselling, her support network, and other resources effectively assisted her in adjusting to her academic and personal life after counselling:

I think I have adjusted in a sense that I have found the strength within myself that was missing at the moment, or I wasn't aware of it, or I didn't know what to do with it. And I have adjusted in such a way that I used the resources out there. You know, the Stress Line, like I had no idea there is a phone number you can call and you can just vent. You don't have to go to counselling for venting, right? There is my friends and there are people that I can reach out to, and of course, I made a lot of friends as a result of counselling.

Even though Ava spoke about the effectiveness of her sessions, she expressed her disappointment with the counsellor's lack of “warmth” and “emotional connection” in her sessions. She revealed that:

I could relate [to the counsellor] and she could relate to me as well, but I felt there is something missing here, and maybe it was just because of the counsellor's nature or it had nothing to do with the culture, but I think there was something missing. I felt there has to be more warmth here. Come on! Like, I am not a robot, you know? I am talking to

you about my emotions, and I don't know, I felt maybe my expectations were wrong but that's how I felt.

Ava also spoke about her counsellor's level of attentiveness and presence in sessions. She expressed that she did not perceive her counsellor as fully present despite her perception of her counsellor's best effort to be attentive. Ava explained: "at the logical level she was understanding, but at the emotional level, I wasn't sure she was there with me."

Ava identified her counsellor as "White" and "Canadian" and spoke of the differences in their cultures. These observed significant cultural differences led Ava to question her counsellor's effectiveness and understanding: "My main concern with that was 'OK. A Canadian counsellor, would she know what I am going through? Can she relate to that? Will she understand?'"

With regard to her counsellor's cultural awareness, Ava explained her disappointment with the counsellor's limited or lack of knowledge about her culture. The counsellor's lack of cultural awareness raised doubts for Ava about the counsellor's effectiveness. She believed that the counsellor's lack of cultural awareness may have undermined her ability to help Ava, which also led Ava to feel "offended" and less confident or open to disclosing further:

To be honest with you then and there I was kind of offended. I was like 'Oh my God! She doesn't even know where Iran is'... So, I would make the association in my head that does she even know what she is doing? I am sure she does, but for me the connection is 'Oh my God! Oops! You don't even know where Iran is. How am I supposed to tell you the rest?'

In addition to lack of knowledge about Iran, Ava perceived the counsellor as having pre-conceptions and general ideas about her Iranian culture. She experienced the counsellor as

unable to see past her cultural background and having generalized her experience. She expressed:

I would be happier if the counsellor would have done more research and wouldn't, like generalize the experience, to like, say that students from Iran would feel this way. You know, like the whole stereotype[ing] and generalizing people, just because of the culture they are from.

Ava also believed that the counsellor attributed her presenting issue to her culture rather than to being a "human being" and focusing on her personal experiences:

We are all human being[s] and we all need to be understood, period. And sure we have different differences like everybody else. Like, I am sure people in Canada have different experiences and can relate to them in different levels. So, don't treat people with like...I mean in my case, just because I am from a different culture don't treat me so differently, you see? I kind of felt singled out to be honest with you sometimes. I don't want that experience.

Ava explained further by comparing her experience of moving out and away from her family to those of other local students, indicating that some personal experiences are similar regardless of where people come from:

Here [in Canada] people move out from a different province, I don't know, say to [the participant's current city] to study and that's also... like, I mean amongst my friends or Canadians, I think they also experience somewhat homesickness. I mean the feelings are the same just I am sure if, I had, I don't know, a different name like Sarah Taylor or something like that I wouldn't be looked upon like different, differently or you know, the feeling is the same I am saying.

Ava later expressed that she recommends counsellors to do more "research" and to "not panic"

when they have clients from different cultures.

In Ava's case, counselling termination was planned and based on a mutual decision between Ava and her counsellor. She believed that her counselling sessions were "completed peacefully" and that counselling was helpful considering her goals that she had presented in her first session. Ava remains open to receiving counselling in the future. She believes that counselling is not a "taboo" and is in fact "very helpful."

Ava encourages other international students to seek counselling despite all the stereotypes and stigmas that are attached to utilizing counselling services in various cultures. She also believes that even though there are cultural differences between international students and their counsellors, these students need to "educate" their counsellors about their cultures and explain their differences. Ava believes that international students need to be "educated" and made aware of counselling services and available resources at their universities.

Go to counselling. It is serious. It helps a lot. I know there is stereotypes about going to counselling in different cultures and again I am talking about like I am generalizing it but I know even here people think 'Oh, there must be something really wrong with you for you to go to counselling' or 'psychotherapy is a taboo' again. But it is not. And it is very helpful. It is like, you know, when you catch a cold you go take a Tylenol or you go see your family physician and when you are not progressing in school and you are always withdrawn, there is something wrong! Hello! Just like catching a cold, you don't see it but go to, go to the counsellor, use those resources. It is certainly very helpful. Despite the fact that there may be cultural differences, but help your counsellor with them. Like explain to them. Educate them. Tell them this is who I am.

Hasti: “I saw my counsellor’s sense of curiosity about my culture...that really helped me.” Hasti is a 25-year-old married female student from Iran who has lived in Canada as an international student for the past five years. She is a graduate student who came to Canada to pursue her university studies. Hasti had previous counselling experiences in Canada; however, she had not received any counselling in her home country, Iran. Since her arrival in Canada, Hasti has faced various adjustment difficulties, such as language and comprehension difficulties, cultural adaptation to social norms, adjusting to unfamiliar social norms, difficulty navigating different and unfamiliar ways of accessing resources and services at school, and unfamiliarity with the educational system. The impact of these challenges resulted in self-blame and “feeling down.” She indicated she overcame the adjustment difficulties by reaching out to her support network and drawing from their experiences, and recognizing the fact that the transition period would run its natural course and eventually end. Hasti revealed that the increase in her personal growth and confidence was the result of those challenges during her “transition period.”

Hasti shared that prior to her most recent counselling experience, she had met with another counsellor; however, since she did not perceive the counsellor as being competent, she terminated counselling after only one session. Later, Hasti sought counselling to cope with the grief regarding the passing of her grandfather with whom she was very close, anxieties that stemmed from her childhood, and unresolved concerns regarding the events leading up to her marriage. Due to her education in and understanding of counselling and therapy, Hasti was open to attending counselling. Hasti was referred to her counsellor by one of her friends and was also supported by her friends to seek counselling. However, in order to prevent her family from worrying about her, and despite their acceptance and understanding of counselling services, she chose not to disclose to her family her decision to seek counselling.

Hasti expected an insight-oriented and non-directive counselling style. Also, due to her education in the field of psychology and counselling, Hasti, expected her counsellor to provide her with active listening and communication skills, and explained that she would find her therapy sessions more beneficial by learning:

... some kind of communication skills or some simple techniques. Like what kind of language you use when you want to, I don't know, raise your concerns about something, what kind of language you use that you don't make the person feel defensive or something, just simple stuff but just something get out of, like as a tool to have to cope with daily life.

Despite having a generally positive counselling experience, she expressed her disappointment with some aspects of her counselling. She indicated that even though she was aware of necessary time boundaries within professions, she still preferred having longer sessions when she was attending counselling. She also reported her frustration with infrequent scheduling of her sessions due to a long wait list. She referred to the lack of continuity to her sessions as a barrier to her progress in counselling. She recalled this part of her experience as being "awful:"

The only thing that I didn't like was that sometimes I couldn't see the counsellor every week... it was like every three weeks sometimes, and even at some point it was like every two months and [be]cause of the waiting list and all that... he was very busy and that was the only thing that made me a little frustrated, you know? Because you feel like you need to make progress and every two months [for] an hour like it is nothing, right?

Hasti also reported her disappointment with not receiving techniques on communication skills and coping strategies:

So, maybe I had very high expectations of what therapy should look like, and I wasn't

getting that on a weekly basis, but I don't know my expectation was pretty much what counselling should be. I don't know, it wasn't any different just talking, exploring, you know, ideas I didn't find whatever ideas that is not functional in your life and working on that, and learning ways to communicate that with whatever family member or whoever it is.

Hasti later explained how she did not gain any insight into the cause of her presenting issues:

“Seeing him as an expert with years of experience, I would, you know I would expect to get a lot of insight about what's going on with me. And maybe he had insights but never gave it to me.”

Hasti found her most recent counselling experience in a university setting in eastern Canada to be generally effective and helpful. She reported several factors that she identified as beneficial and constructive in creating an overall positive counselling experience. For instance, she viewed the strong therapeutic relationship between her and her counsellor as the most significant and valuable part of her counselling experience. She also identified other effective aspects of her counselling experience, such as her counsellor's meaningful personal disclosures, her counsellor's non-judgemental stance that allowed her to talk openly, and her counsellor's awareness and curiosity about her culture. For instance, regarding her counsellor's personal disclosures, she explained:

One thing he did and that really helped me was a lot of, like, self-disclosure, because I had this like existential anxieties, and he came up with his ideas about that, which I really appreciated the fact that, you know, he told me some personal stuff; it was more like a conversation rather than me talking. That was something I would say the most, yeah it was very beneficial.

Hasti also reported that she was able to apply the strength-based approach used in her

counselling sessions to help her adjust to her life after counselling. She somehow felt supported knowing that returning to counselling was an option available to her.

Several times throughout the interview, Hasti emphasized the importance of alliance in counselling sessions. In her first session, Hasti perceived her counsellor as competent, experienced, understanding, and “confident” in working with international students. She identified the “strong” therapeutic relationship between her and her counsellor as the most helpful aspect of counselling and the “best part” of her experience. She reported:

I felt like I am not being judged or anything, or yeah, I could talk about anything with my counsellor. And, I mean like the alliance between us was pretty strong and at the end [it] was our, you know, the relationship that was really helpful in terms of me feeling better. She later explained that, regardless of the long wait time between her counselling sessions, her strong alliance with her counsellor allowed her to feel comfortable in disclosing further:

I have help; you know if I go crazy there is this person I could go talk to. And, you know, the fact that I had someone, you know, which I could go talk to even like after a long time [or] something, but I was still happy about that and that made me feel a lot better.

Throughout the interview session, Hasti spoke about her counsellor’s level of attentiveness and presence in sessions. She believed that her counsellor was not “distracted” and seemed to have been able to convey his attentiveness and understanding with accurate comments and observations:

After like I talked for five minutes and he just says one sentence, but that captures really the whole thing, and then I would say he understood what I was saying, and also sometimes really going right to the point of what I was saying... I felt, you know, he is

understanding me and also just the fact that he was listening, you know, you don't feel like your therapist is distracted by something.

Even though therapeutic approach was not information that was formally gathered from the counsellor, Hasti was able to describe her counsellor's approach in her own terms. According to Hasti, she received a combination of strength-based and emotion-focused approaches. She also indicated that the counselling sessions were predominantly non-directive in nature.

Reflecting back on her counselling experience, Hasti observed significant cultural differences between her and her counsellor. She identified her counsellor as "Canadian" and having a "completely different culture" from her. Despite the perceived cultural differences, Hasti still experienced her counsellor as being culturally sensitive and competent. She found her counsellor's interest in her cultural background, as well as his willingness to learn about her culture, influential in allowing her to disclose further. For instance, she recalled the counsellor seeking clarifications when he was unfamiliar or unsure of some aspects of her culture. Hasti perceived her counsellor's cultural awareness as being a result of his work with previous clients and his personal research.

In Hasti's case, counselling termination was planned and based on a mutual decision between her and her counsellor. It appeared that counselling ran its natural course and ended after 12 sessions because Hasti was feeling better and was able to "manage the whole thing." Hasti would have continued counselling if the follow-up sessions were not too costly for alumni students. Hasti remains open to receiving counselling in the future. She revealed that would seek counselling in the future because of its relevance to her field of study and the opportunity to become more "self-aware:"

I would love to be in counselling just because it's related to my field obviously and I just

love being involved in this process myself to get a sense what really bothers me, what I don't like or like about... it is always good to be working you know on yourself and be more self-aware and all...

She also encourages other international students to seek counselling despite all the stereotypes and stigmas that are attached to utilizing counselling services in various cultures. She emphasizes that experiencing adjustment difficulties is “normal” and seeking counselling is not a “taboo.” Hasti also believes that counselling services should provide international students with information regarding their fees and services.

Overall, Hasti recommends that counsellors appreciate the importance of culture and cultural differences in counselling international students and their expectations of counselling. In working with international students, Hasti encourages counsellors to consider their clients' cultural backgrounds while exploring the client's counselling goals and expectations. She also believes that counselling needs to be “culturally sensitive.” She emphasizes the importance of international students' cultural values and counsellors' non-judgmental acceptance and understanding of those values. In addition, in order to make the transition easier for other international students, Hasti recommends that universities assist international students in expanding their support networks and establishing ties so that they benefit from their social networks' advice and support.

Sam: “I feel I am well integrated—that I speak French makes me feel like one of yours.” Sam is a 25-year-old male student from Mexico who has lived in Canada as an international student since 2007. He is an undergraduate student who, after completing high school, moved to Canada to pursue university studies. Sam has had previous counselling experiences both in Canada and abroad. Upon his arrival in Canada, he did not face any

adjustment difficulties. However, as a youth, he found it challenging to manage his finances and develop organizational skills.

Sam explained that he has had several counselling experiences prior to his most recent sessions in a university counselling setting. He sought counselling when addiction to alcohol and drugs created legal issues and began to affect his academic life, and his relationship with his girlfriend and their newborn son. Sam was not convinced that counselling would be effective considering the nature of his presenting issue, his assumptions about counselling, and his personal beliefs and understanding about the success rate of counselling when treating addiction. Sam believed that counselling would not be able to provide him with the help he needed for his addiction. Rather, he held the belief that he would be able to overcome his addictions using his own resources:

...saying that I know myself, they won't help me, or they don't know how to help me, or they don't know myself. They don't know how to deal with that [addiction]. And it is normal, counselling has never helped with addictions, like 90% of the people who go to there, to counselling, they keep doing drugs, it is not the thing that works, so I knew that. Sam furthered explained: "My alcohol problem was too big; my drug problem was too big to go to talk to someone. Once every two weeks wasn't going to help me," conveying his perception that counselling would not be a good fit for addressing his presenting issue. In the process of seeking counselling, Sam's significant others, particularly his mother and his girlfriend, supported him in his decision.

Sam believed that his most recent counselling experience at a university setting did not serve its purpose given his counselling goals. He initially found his more recent counselling experience in a university setting to be ineffective, unhelpful, and "a waste of time" in fulfilling

his specific goals of addressing addiction to drugs and alcohol. However, during the brief course of counselling, he realized that the issue of addiction had to be addressed before engaging in the counselling process, and may have also increased his acceptance of treatment for his addiction. Nevertheless, Sam expressed satisfaction with the short wait time and accessibility of the counselling services.

Sam later expressed his disenchantment with the referral process after counselling termination and that he expected to be referred to a psychiatrist or more specialized services, rather than services that he had previously attended and had not been satisfied with. He reported: “They [the university counselling services] tell me ‘We are going to refer you somewhere else.’ I was expecting they refer me somewhere good, you know? Like to a psychiatrist or somewhere good. Like a good doctor or something.”

Sam also discussed his experience of working with a student intern for the intake session. The student intern’s perceived shyness prevented him from being “honest” and disclosing important information about his presenting issue. Sam indicated, “It was hard; it was harder to be honest to a student than to a counsellor.” He then explained:

She worry too much for this kind of thing [referring to the paperwork and the documents on the table] instead of asking questions and, and I don’t know, I didn’t feel very comfortable, but that’s why I didn’t tell her much the first time.

Sam further expressed his satisfaction with attending “real counselling” in the second session, which he attributed to seeing a “counsellor” rather than a student intern. Sam also reported experiencing a “good” therapeutic relationship with his counsellor. He said that he could not elaborate more on the relationship since he met his counsellor only once.

When discussing his counsellor’s cultural awareness, Sam expressed difficulty in

discerning his counsellor's level of cultural competency and understanding, as well as how he could share his cultural experience given limited time together:

She was understanding me, but maybe it was hard for me [be]cause all my background, Mexico and all had something to stay with me, to make who I am. But it's hard to say everything. Like, it is hard to explain who I am in one hour to someone. So, it is really a long-time work.

Reflecting back on his most recent counselling experience, Sam revealed that he experienced cultural similarities with his counsellor. He explained he did not experience any difficulties related to cultural adjustment upon arriving to Canada due to his ability to speak the language of the host culture: "I was well integrated. I feel I am well integrated. The fact that I speak French makes me feel like one of yours, and I don't feel very different. So I never had a cultural problem." Sam also felt a certain congruence or resonance with the host culture, which he attributed to his ability to speak French but also to the fact that he was brought up in "Western countries" and in a "Western lifestyle."

In Sam's case, counselling termination occurred immediately after the second session. Sam was referred to services that specialized in treating addictions in ways the university counselling services did not. He reported that after having attended the second counselling session, he received the referral information via e-mail. While Sam expressed his disenchantment with the referral process, throughout the course of the interview, he said he remains open to seeking and receiving counselling in the future for personal issues.

Sam recommends that counsellors explore and appreciate their clients' cultural backgrounds, and help international students "integrate" and adjust to the new culture. Sam encourages international students to seek counselling and recommends universities pay close

attention to the lives of international students once they arrive in Canada through creating opportunities for international students to establish and expand their support network.

Between-person Analysis

While the summaries above provide a detailed and contextualized description of each participant's counselling experience, themes generated through the between-person analysis allow for identifying aspects of the counselling experience that are unique to some participants or similar across participants. The thematic analysis also enables plausible ways of conceptualizing and understanding participant experiences through a meaningful organization of the themes. The between-person analysis that ensued generated eight themes (a) openness towards seeking counselling, (b) hesitancy towards seeking counselling, (c) helpful aspects of counselling, (d) hindering aspects of counselling, (e) positive aspects of therapeutic relationship, (f) hindrances to therapeutic relationship, (g) counsellor's cultural awareness, and (h) counsellor's limited cultural awareness.

Upon further analysis, it became apparent that the themes could be grouped into meaningful pairings. These pairings can be understood along four dimensions, whereby a pair of themes seems to reflect the "polarities" of each dimension. While not part of the original procedure for data analysis, the following dimensions could provide a means to understanding the experiences of counselling by participants in this study: (a) seeking counselling, (b) perceptions of counselling effectiveness, (c) therapeutic relationship, and (d) culture in counselling. The following explication of each dimension allows for a comparing and contrasting of the participants' experiences while drawing contextual information from each participant's descriptive summary. For ease of reference, Table 1 depicts each dimension with its respective theme pairings, and clusters of meaning further characterize each theme within a pairing. I then

explain each dimension further below.

Table 1

Dimensions, Theme Pairings, and Clusters of Meaning

Dimensions		Theme Pairings
		• Clusters of meaning
Seeking Counselling	Openness towards Seeking Counselling	Hesitancy towards Seeking Counselling
	• Previous counselling experiences enhance awareness/willingness to seek counselling • Previous training/education in counselling influential in decision to seek counselling • Support network encourages client to seek counselling • Acknowledgement of need for professional help enhances readiness to seek counselling	• Client belief that they are better positioned to solve problems using own resources • Client belief that counselling cannot help with particular presenting issue
Perceptions of Counselling Effectiveness	Helpful Aspects of Counselling	Hindering Aspects of Counselling
	• Perception that counselling services are accessible • Enabled client to use transferable counselling techniques after termination • Enabled client to expand social network • Enabled client to rely on personal strength	• Infrequent counselling sessions • Counselling perceived as “waste of time” • Referral to other specialized services after only one session

- Specific counselling goals relevant to presenting issues
- Counselling mainly non-directive

Therapeutic Relationship

Positive Aspects of Therapeutic Relationship

- Enabled client to feel comfortable
- Enabled client to disclose more openly
- Increased client openness to future counselling
- Feelings of closeness contribute to healing
- Enabled client to feel understood
- Counsellor self-disclosure
- Counsellor cultural awareness
- Counsellor non-judgemental stance
- Counsellor attentiveness and “presence”

Hindrances to Therapeutic Relationship

- Counsellor logical/rational approach at expense of client preference for emotional connection and warmth
- Client doubts self when expectations of counsellor warmth and emotional connection are not met

Culture in Counselling

Counsellor’s Cultural Awareness

- Counsellor curiosity and willingness to learn about client culture enables client to disclose more openly
- Previous research/work with clients from other cultures enhances perception of counsellor as

Counsellor’s Limited Cultural Awareness

- Counsellor pre-conceptions of client culture elicits doubts about counsellor effectiveness
- Counsellor misattributions regarding client culture leads to feeling misunderstood

culturally competent

- Client feels stereotyped by counsellor generalization of experiences based on client cultural background
-

Dimension 1: Seeking Counselling

Participants spoke about their experiences related to seeking counselling. Theme pairings for this dimension demonstrate that participants varied in their openness to seeking counselling; two participants were quite open and eager about counselling, whereas one participant expressed more hesitancy about engaging in counselling. These differing experiences are further described below with accompanying clusters of meaning.

Openness towards seeking counselling. Four clusters of meaning emerged from the interviews that reflected participants' openness towards seeking counselling. These clusters of meaning suggest that the participants' previous counselling experiences, previous training/education in counselling, support network, and acknowledgement of need for professional helped influence their readiness to seek counselling.

While not directly speaking to the influence of previous counselling experience on openness to counselling in the interviews, all three participants did report receiving counselling prior to their most recent counselling experiences at a university counselling setting. Ava and Sam indicated that prior to their recent counselling, they had received counselling both abroad and in Canada; Hasti had only received counselling in Canada.

Furthermore, two of the three participants, Ava and Hasti acknowledged that they were open to receiving counselling due to their education and training in the field of counselling.

Having a support network that includes either friends, family members, or peers seemed

particularly influential in the process of seeking counselling. All three participants indicated that their support network played a role by providing encouragement of some kind. Ava's support network included her mother, family members, friends, and previous counsellor. In the case of Sam, his mother and romantic partner were his supporters in seeking counselling. In Hasti's case, even though she believed that her family would understand and support her decision to seek counselling, she chose to not disclose her decision to her family because she did not want to worry them. Instead, Hasti's friends inquired about her counselling sessions which, in turn, played a key role in encouraging and supporting Hasti to seek counselling.

Ava and Hasti directly acknowledged in the interview that they sought counselling because they needed professional help. Sam did not express this need directly but did acknowledge having an addiction problem that was interfering with his relationships. This acknowledgement seemed to suggest a certain awareness of a need for professional help. Sam's reasons for seeking counselling were mostly due to his support network's insistence and encouragement. Sam believed that the act of seeking help and eventually attending counselling would serve as "a placebo effect," which would gradually rebuild his relationship with his significant other for whom receiving counselling was very important.

All the participants also expressed their openness toward seeking counselling in the future. For Ava and Hasti, the value of counselling and its relevance to their field of study appeared to continue to influence their openness toward seeking counselling beyond this most recent experience. For instance, Hasti expressed that: "I would like to be in counselling just because it's related to my field, and I just love being involved in this process." She also believed that counselling provides a valuable opportunity for self-awareness. In Sam's case, while he felt his most recent counselling experience did not assist him with his drug and alcohol addiction, he

nevertheless expressed appreciation of, and remains open to, counselling for other personal issues in the future.

Hesitancy towards seeking counselling. Hesitancy towards seeking counselling was reported by one participant only, Sam. His hesitancy seemed influenced, in part, by the nature of his presenting issue and his assumptions about counselling. He was not convinced that counselling would be effective in his situation. He believed counselling would not be able to provide him with the help he needed specifically for his addiction. Sam personally believed that counselling has a low success rate when addressing addiction and, in fact, only medication and psychiatric intervention could help with his addiction.

Sam's assumption that counselling would be ineffective considering his presenting problem existed prior to seeking counselling at the university. Instead, he believed he was better positioned to solve his problems using his own resources: "I know myself, they won't help me, or they don't know how to help me, or they don't know myself. They don't know how to deal with that [addiction]."

Dimension 2: Perceptions of Counselling Effectiveness

When participants reflected on their overall counselling experience, they were able to qualify aspects of their experience as being either helpful or hindering towards addressing the goals they brought to counselling. While all participants identified some aspects of their counselling experience as being effective and helpful, two participants also described some aspects as being ineffective and unhelpful. In effect, counselling experiences were rarely completely positive or completely negative; rather, participants mostly reported a mixed experience. Participants' perceptions of what was helpful and what was hindering about the counselling they received are elaborated below.

Helpful aspects of counselling. All three participants identified some aspects of their counselling experience as being effective. The helpful aspects of counselling were mostly attributed to counselling process, outcomes, and services. With regard to the counselling process, all three participants appreciated their counselling sessions as being mainly non-directive. For these participants, non-directiveness was described in terms of their ability to take the lead by starting off the sessions and discussing the topic of their choice. For instance, Hasti referred to her sessions as being mostly “non-directive” and reported that: “It was me starting the sessions talking about whatever I wanted like sometimes I just talked about something that happened like an hour ago, sometimes I would talk about my childhood, so it was me taking the lead.”

While participants were able to identify when their counsellor was engaging in a certain orientation, such as cognitive behavioural therapy or emotion-focused therapy, non-directiveness—as they described it—seemed to be at the heart of what participants appreciated most in their counsellor’s style.

Another helpful aspect about the process of counselling regarded how the counselling goals were relevant to the presenting issue. Such was the experience of Ava and Hasti who reported that their counselling’s effectiveness hinged on actually fulfilling the goals that they had brought to counselling in their first session. For instance, overall, Ava found counselling effective given her academic goals. She reported: “I was there for a certain goal, and that was to get through my academic with success and I think that was very helpful. They helped me go through that.”

Lastly, participants commented on accessibility of counselling services as being important. Hasti and Sam perceived counselling services as being available and felt supported knowing that returning to counselling in the future was always an option available to them. Sam

particularly appreciated the accessibility of the services in terms of the short wait time and availability of the counselling services.

There were several counselling outcomes that participants identified positively with, namely having tangible tools and strategies to use after counselling was completed, expanding one's social network, and observing personal strengths more readily. For instance, in Ava's case, counselling seemed to assist her in establishing and strengthening her social network. Feeling more socially connected, in turn, assisted Ava in adjusting to her academic and personal life after counselling.

Finally, counselling appeared quite effective in enabling both Ava and Hasti to rely on their personal strengths in ways they felt unable to prior attending this most recent counselling. Hasti reported that she was able to apply the strength-based approach used in her counselling sessions to help her adjust to her life after counselling. Ava felt her counsellor helped her rely more effectively on her existing personal strength. For instance, she reported: "I have found the strength within myself that was missing at the moment or I wasn't aware of it...I have adjusted in a way that I used the resources out there." Ava's overall counselling experience seemed particularly powerful for her to the extent that it was influential in shaping her career path. In fact, her decision to pursue graduate studies in counselling was a direct result of her counselling experience.

Hindering aspects of counselling. In contrast to helpful aspects experienced by each of the participants, two of three participants, Sam and Hasti, found some aspects of counselling services ineffective and unhelpful. For instance, Sam believed that counselling did not serve its purpose given his specific goals of wanting to address his addiction to drugs and alcohol. Sam also expressed disappointment with the referral process after counselling termination; he

expected to be referred to more specialized services for his addiction, rather than referred to services that he had previously attended and had been dissatisfied with.

Contrary to Sam's experience of a short wait time to receive counselling, Hasti experienced infrequent scheduling of her sessions once counselling was initiated due to a lengthy wait list. She referred to the lack of continuity in her sessions as a barrier to her progress in counselling. Hasti's exasperation with infrequent appointments becomes particularly clear when she says: "...he was very busy and that was the only thing that made me a little frustrated, you know? Because you feel like you need to make progress and every two months [for] an hour like it is nothing, right?"

Dimension 3: Therapeutic Relationship

Participants described their therapeutic relationship with their respective counsellors at some length. All three participants reported experiencing a "good" therapeutic relationship in their sessions overall. Upon closer review, two participants were able to clearly identify positive aspects of the therapeutic relationship that helped enhance their counselling experiences, and one participant directly expressed disappointment with some aspects of the therapeutic relationship. These varied experiences can be conceptualized on a continuum that shows the complexity of the therapeutic relationship as having facilitative elements co-existing with hindering elements for any one participant. That all participants experienced a "good" therapeutic relationship with their counsellor suggests that hindering elements do not necessarily compromise the overall counselling experience.

Positive aspects of therapeutic relationship. Clusters of meaning within this theme seemed to centre around two different foci: (a) counsellor qualities and characteristics that clients appreciated and that seemed to facilitate the relationship and (b) positive aspects of the

relationship that impacted the client.

Counsellor qualities that one of the participants seemed to view favourably include counsellor use of self-disclosure, counsellor cultural awareness, and conveying a non-judgemental stance and attentiveness. Hasti identified these qualities as being very influential in allowing her to feel connected, understood, and disclose more openly. For instance, with regard to counsellor's meaningful personal disclosures, it is worth quoting Hasti once more:

One thing he did that really helped me was a lot of self-disclosure, because I had existential anxieties and he came up with his ideas about that which I really appreciated the fact that you know he told me some personal stuff. It was more like a conversation rather than me talking.

Based on Ava and Sam's interviews, these counsellor qualities were less apparent and did not appear to be as influential to their counselling experiences.

While these experiences reflect ways in which a counsellor's disposition in session can facilitate the therapeutic relationship, the therapeutic relationship also seemed to have a positive influence on the participants and their in-session behaviour. Ava and Hasti reported that their positive therapeutic relationship with their counsellors enabled them to feel rather comfortable and disclose more in sessions. In Sam's case, even though he recalled the alliance as being "good," he did not identify it as an influential aspect of his counselling experience. Hasti, who felt she had a particularly "strong" therapeutic relationship with her counsellor, referred to the relationship as the "best" and most influential part of her counselling experience. Hasti went on to explain that, regardless of the long wait time between her counselling sessions, her strong alliance with her counsellor allowed her to feel understood and to "heal."

Hindrances to therapeutic relationship. While all participants were able to speak

positively about the therapeutic relationship, one participant struggled with some “unmet expectations” that impacted the nature of the relationship with her counsellor. Despite Ava’s overall positive therapeutic relationship with her counsellor, she expressed disappointment with the lack of “warmth” and “emotional connection” in her sessions. Even though Ava did not provide a specific example where she experienced the lack of emotional connection in her sessions, she compared the absence of “warmth” in sessions to “developing empathy.” She indicated that “if you don’t have empathy you can’t ever develop it.” Ava perceived the counsellor as being understanding “at the logical level,” but believed that the counsellor was not present and attentive emotionally. As a result, the counsellor’s logical and rational approach led Ava to doubt the counsellor’s capacity for “emotional connection” and presence in sessions.

Dimension 4: Culture in Counselling

During the interviews, I asked participants directly about how they perceived cultural differences with their counsellors in sessions, as well as their counsellor’s level of cultural understanding. Participants confidently shared in-session experiences that they felt reflected the intersection of the culture they identify with and the culture they perceived the counsellor as identifying with. The dimension of “culture in counselling” demonstrates that counsellors varied in their expression of cultural awareness. The extent to which counsellor awareness of culture resonated with participants was also understood by participants to reflect a certain cultural sensitivity and competence on the counsellor’s part.

When it came to exploring culture in the therapeutic milieu, one participant perceived her counsellor as culturally sensitive and aware, whereas another participant perceived her counsellor as having limited cultural awareness. While the third participant was unable to discern the counsellor’s level of cultural awareness due to his limited number of counselling sessions, he

nevertheless offered interesting observations about culture. What follows is a detailed description of how participants perceived the “cultural intersection” with their respective counsellor.

Counsellor’s cultural awareness. Only Hasti perceived her counsellor as expressing cultural awareness and, therefore, coming across as culturally sensitive. Even though Hasti described her counsellor as “Canadian” and “having a completely different culture,” she felt that the counsellor still conveyed cultural understanding. She observed the counsellor as having a certain “curiosity” about her cultural background. While she did not provide a detailed example of counsellor curiosity, she recalled the counsellor generally seeking clarifications when he was unfamiliar or unsure of some aspects of her culture. Such curiosity conveyed to Hasti that the counsellor was interested in understanding her, and this stance allowed her to disclose more openly. Hasti speculated that her counsellor’s cultural sensitivity was a result of his work with previous clients and his personal research. The counsellor’s perceived experiences of having done research and worked with clients from other cultures contributed to Hasti’s perception of the counsellor as cognizant of cultural differences and as culturally competent.

Counsellor’s limited cultural awareness. Similar to Hasti, Ava identified observable cultural differences with her counsellor, referring to her counsellor as “White” and “Canadian.” However, Ava was disappointed with her counsellor’s limited and, in some cases, lack of knowledge about her culture. One poignant example that Ava recalled is when the counsellor indicated that they were not familiar with Ava’s country of origin, Iran, and did not know where Iran was. Ava reported feeling offended at the moment indicating: “The fact that when I say I am from Iran and at least know where Iran is.” This lack of apparently basic knowledge upset Ava somewhat, and she began to experience doubts about her counsellor: “So, I would make the association in my head that does she even know what she is doing? You don’t even know where

Iran is. How am I supposed to tell you the rest?”

Ava also felt that the counsellor was unable to see past specific aspects of her cultural background. For instance the counsellor connected Ava's presenting problems to the fact that Ava is from Iran. It appeared that while observing that Ava is from Iran, the counsellor had made her own interpretations of difficulties a student from Iran might encounter. The counsellor also appeared to have made some assumptions of what this experience would be like for, or mean to, Ava. These interpretations and assumptions took the forms of generalizing Ava's experience.

In response to Ava's feeling of homesickness and her experiences of dealing with adjustment difficulties, the counsellor conveyed that “all students from Iran feel this way.” Ava revealed that: “I would have been happier if the counsellor had done more research and wouldn't generalize my experience.” For Ava, being an international student from Iran was a subjective experience that could not be reflected in the experiences of each and every student from Iran. She went on to explain: “What I mean by subjectivity of my experience is that I would have liked it if the counsellor would have explored MY experience, rather than labelling it as Iranian student from Iran.”

These experiences led Ava to perceive her counsellor as having pre-conceptions and general ideas about Iranian culture that did not resonate with her understanding and experiences of her Iranian upbringing. Ava believed that the counsellor's lack of cultural awareness may have undermined her ability to be of assistance. Reflective of a lack of cultural sensitivity, Ava actually felt “offended” and stereotyped by her counsellor. The experience also left her feeling misunderstood and less confident in, or open to, disclosing further.

Lastly, Sam, who was born in Mexico, reported experiencing cultural similarities with his counsellor. Sam associated this cultural congruence and similarity with his ability to speak

French, one of the official languages of the host country, and the fact that he was raised in a “Western lifestyle” and “Western countries.” Amidst this perceived congruence, Sam expressed difficulty in discerning the level of his counsellor’s cultural awareness. Another possibility that may explain this difficulty in addition to cultural congruence is that Sam believed one’s culture could not be made known to another during such a limited time together. However, this latter observation might minimally indicate there were no immediately observable cultural differences to navigate in the short term. Overall, while Sam focused on similarities with his counsellor’s culture, his experience conveys certain “neutrality” regarding in-session expression of cultural awareness by the counsellor.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The results emerging from participant rich descriptions from the interviews illuminate some interesting and important observations that may improve our understanding of ways international students can experience counselling in a university setting. In the following section, I begin by discussing transitional difficulties that participants identified to provide context to their counselling experiences, and to assist in understanding and interpreting the results. I then interpret the results using the literature review provided in this document. I discuss implications for counsellors and university counselling services that are reflected in the main findings. Finally, I present some limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

Participants’ Transitional Difficulties

There was some overlap between the adjustment difficulties reported in this study and those in the existing literature regarding international students’ common transitional challenges upon arrival in Canada. For instance, similar to the literature, participants in this study reported

experiencing financial difficulties (Arthur, 1997; Dipeolu, et al., 2007; Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994; Komiya & Eells, 2001; Yi et al., 2003), language difficulties (Mori, 2000), discrimination (Arthur, 2004; Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007; Hanassab, 2006; Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004), and adjusting to a new culture and unfamiliar social norms (Arthur, 1997; Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994; Olivas & Li, 2006; Russell et al., 2008). There were also challenges that seemed to be specific to the act of moving abroad and settling into a new academic environment, such as feelings of homesickness and sadness, transitional depression, unfamiliarity with the educational system, difficulty navigating unfamiliar ways of accessing services at the university, choosing a program of study, and developmental challenges such as learning life skills.

Of the many and varied adjustment difficulties possible, participants emphasized the following three as most salient to their transitioning to university life in Canada: (a) language and communication, (b) adjusting to a new culture, and (c) finances. These transitional challenges are also cited in the literature as the most common upon students' arrival in the host country, and are worth addressing individually below.

Language inefficiency is one of the most difficult challenges that international students may experience in their cross-cultural transition (Mori, 2000). According to Yeh and Inose (2003), international students who are more proficient in the host language tend to be more comfortable and confident in interactions with members of the host culture. This was evident for Sam whose ability to speak French—one of the host culture's official languages—enabled him to interact with members of the host culture, connect with his Canadian peers, and expand his social network with greater ease.

Interestingly, only one participant presented cultural adjustment difficulty as the main

focus of counselling. That issues related to cultural adjustment did not appear among all of the participants is a reminder that international students' counselling needs are not always exclusive to cross-cultural experiences and adjustment difficulties; rather, international students may also face challenges similar to those of their local peers in the host country, as was the case for Sam who presented with addiction interfering with personal relationships, and Hasti who presented with grief and marital issues (Kenny et al., 2009; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). In addition, some participants reported experiencing homesickness, depression, anxiety, and loneliness that are also reported as some of the intrapersonal issues that international students experience in the process of adjusting to a new culture (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

Financial difficulties are frequently reported by international students upon their arrival in the host country (Arthur, 1997; Dipeolu, et al., 2007; Khoo & Abu-Rasain, 1994; Komiya & Ells, 2001; Yi et al., 2003). In the current study, even though not the focus of counselling, two participants identified having financial difficulties. In both cases, it was married graduate students who identified issues related to finances.

Interpretation of the Dimensions, Themes, and Clusters of Meaning

The following eight themes were generated from the between-person analysis: (a) openness towards seeking counselling, (b) hesitancy towards seeking counselling, (c) helpful aspects of counselling, (d) hindering aspects of counselling, (e) positive aspects of therapeutic relationship, (f) hindrances to therapeutic relationship, (g) counsellor's cultural awareness, and (h) counsellor's limited cultural awareness. These themes were further conceptualized in terms of polarities along the following four dimensions: seeking counselling, perceptions of counselling effectiveness, therapeutic relationship, and culture in counselling, which are discussed below.

Dimension 1: Seeking Counselling

The literature suggests that international students tend to underutilize counselling services (Raunic & Xenos, 2008; Russell et al., 2008) or find their counselling experiences unsatisfactory (Arthur, 2004; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Experiences of services utilization imparted in this study might first be understood along gender lines. Both female participants in this study were open to receiving counselling, and acknowledged their satisfaction with their overall counselling. This is consistent with the literature which suggests that, compared to male international students, female international students prefer to discuss their concerns with a counsellor (Seo, 2005; Yakushko et al., 2008) and may be more open towards seeking counselling (Pederson, 1991a; Morgan et al., 2003; Seo, 2005). Further supporting this gender distinction is that the male participant, Sam, expressed preference for solving his own problems. This is consistent with one of the reasons for international students' reluctance to use counselling services (Flisher et al., 2002; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004), which may suggest that international students who are male, or pursuing undergraduate studies rather than graduate studies, are less likely to utilize counselling services (Flisher et al., 2002), both of which applied in Sam's case.

It might have been expected that participants identify particular cultural values or beliefs related to receiving and attending counselling that would influence their decision making process; however, such was not the case. Contrary to the portrayal in the literature of international students' generally unfavourable attitudes toward counselling services (e.g., Arthur, 2004; Dipeolu et al., 2007), none of the participants in this study indicated hesitations that related to the extent to which counselling is established or accepted within their home country, or endorsed by family members, significant others, or their culture. That all three participants had received counselling elsewhere prior to attending university may help explain their open attitude

and willingness to pursue counselling. While the prevalence of international students involved in counselling prior to moving to the host country does not appear to have been investigated, the findings here support that previous engagement with helping professionals may influence decision-making behaviour regarding counselling. Even less typical was that two of the participants had education and training in the field of counselling prior to engaging in counselling. Both varieties of “familiarity” with counselling may play a role in attitudes towards seeking and receiving counselling.

In addition, in a study conducted by Tata and Leong (1994), the social support network was determined as one of the significant predictors in determining Chinese-American students’ attitudes towards seeking professional help and counselling. In the current study, all three participants acknowledged receiving supports of some kind in the process of seeking counselling. Therefore, it could be postulated that these participants’ support network may have influenced their view and attitude towards counselling and, in turn, motivated their decision to seek counselling. Overall, these findings demonstrate how previous counselling experiences, education and training in the field, gender-informed views, and social support contribute to how international students position themselves towards seeking counselling.

Dimension 2: Perceptions of Counselling Effectiveness

Despite some hindering aspects in counselling, such as infrequent sessions and referral to other specialized service, all participants experienced helpful and effective aspects albeit to varying degrees. Use of transferable counselling techniques after termination, ability to expand their social network, ability to rely on personal strength, reaching counselling goals, accessibility of services, as well as the non-directive nature of counselling sessions were identified as helpful aspects consistent with what clients had expected prior to engaging in their most recent

counselling.

Even though the literature suggests that certain groups of international students generally prefer a more direct counselling style (Bradley et al., 1995; Fowler et al., 2011), the results from the current study demonstrate the participants' general satisfaction with the non-directive nature of the sessions. This contrasts with Yuen and Tinsley (1981) who reported that international students from Iran expect their counsellors to be "an authority figure prescribing more definite and clear-cut solutions to their problems while they assume a more passive and dependent role" (p. 68). Interestingly, two of the participants in the current study were from Iran, yet they expressed satisfaction with the non-directive nature of the sessions. Less is known regarding counselling preferences of international students from Mexico, the country-of-origin of the third participant Sam. Sam's satisfaction with the non-directive counselling approach could be influenced by his culture and his willingness to assume a more independent role in counselling. For the participants in this study, counsellor non-directiveness was characterized in terms of the offer for the client to take the lead by starting each session and choosing the topic of the discussion. While non-directive counselling can be understood in different ways, the participants' reports are consistent with Snyder's (1945) definition of non-directive counselling—that the counsellor provides a forum where the client is able to choose the goal of therapy and operate independently. Even though the participants in this study appreciated the non-directive nature of counselling, other international students beyond this sample may prefer varying degrees of overall directiveness in counselling worth exploring.

It is possible that for some of the participants, their education in the field of counselling influenced their understanding of and preferences for different counselling approaches. Furthermore, all participants had had previous counselling experiences. These experiences may

have afforded them greater exposure to different counselling styles, and subsequently they were able to articulate their personal preferences for a non-directive approach in their most recent counselling experiences at a university setting.

Dimension 3: Therapeutic Relationship

For participants in this study, there were unmet counselling expectations and cultural differences with their counsellors; however, these did not appear to strain the working alliance significantly. All three participants reported experiencing a positive therapeutic relationship overall despite some hindering aspects of their experiences. For these participants, the therapeutic relationship was understood through facilitative counsellor qualities and characteristics and for its positive impact on the client.

Conditions such as empathy, counsellor genuineness, and unconditional positive regard have been identified as being effective in building a therapeutic relationship (Hackney & Cormier, 2009; Sharf, 2008). It is worth noting that these counsellor characteristics as well as counsellors' meaningful self-disclosure, attentiveness and presence, cultural awareness, and ability to be non-judgmental were similarly present in some of the participants' counselling sessions. The therapeutic condition of empathy seemed to play the most prominent role among participants' experiences vis-à-vis the therapeutic relationship. With regard to the counsellor's ability to be empathic, Ava was disappointed with her counsellor's lack of empathy and "emotional connection," which in turn led Ava to doubt the counsellor's ability to be attentive and present in sessions. On the other hand, for Hasti, the counsellor's unconditional positive regard and ability to be empathic and genuine was central in making her feel understood and "healed."

It is also worth noting that in this study, cultural awareness in some instances contributed

to the therapeutic relationship. One participant in particular, who also perceived her counsellor as culturally competent and sensitive, spoke about her “strong” therapeutic relationship with her counsellor. It is possible that Hasti’s positive experience may in part be due to her observations of her counsellor’s level of cultural sensitivity and curiosity, as well as his ability to build rapport. Despite questioning her counsellor’s cultural awareness, another participant, Ava, also reported experiencing a “good” therapeutic relationship with her counsellor. It appears the counsellor’s limited cultural awareness, although evident to Ava and generating some frustration, did not have a significantly negative impact on the therapeutic relationship.

Dimension 4: Culture in Counselling

The literature emphasizes the significance of culture in counselling and the multicultural nature of client-counsellor interactions (e.g., Collins & Arthur, 2007, 2010a; Pederson, 1991b). Consistent with the culture-infused counselling model, culture must be considered in counsellors’ work with all clients (Collins & Arthur, 2007; 2010a).

One of the most salient findings of the current study was the participants’ perception of culture in the counselling process. To illuminate the participants’ understanding of culture in counselling, participants were asked questions such as “Tell me about cultural differences, if any, between you and your counsellor” and “Tell me about ‘cultural understanding’ between you and your counsellor.” Although two of the participants perceived some cultural dissimilarities with their respective counsellor, the dissimilarities did not seem to pose significant barriers to the overall counselling experience. This suggests that although cultural differences were noticed, they were not central to the student counselling experience. The three distinct experiences of the counsellor’s cultural awareness shared by the participants in the current study are expounded upon below.

One participant, Ava, expressed disappointment with her counsellor's lack of or limited knowledge and understanding about her culture. She perceived the counsellor as having pre-conceptions about her culture and saw her as unable to see past her cultural background. She also believed that the counsellor generalized her experience by attributing her presenting issue primarily to her culture as opposed to her personal experiences.

Ava's experience can also be related to Collins and Arthur's multicultural competency framework. The second domain of this framework emphasizes the importance of the counsellor's ability to understand the client's worldview (Collins & Arthur, 2007). According to this domain, two levels of awareness have been recommended for counsellors: (a) having a general knowledge about the group of clients, as well as, (b) exploring and gathering information specific to clients that are being assisted through counselling (Collins & Arthur, 2007). It is also suggested that clients' presenting issues should not be simply attributed to their cultural membership or background (Collins & Arthur, 2007). However, in the present study, Ava's counsellor appeared to demonstrate a general knowledge of Ava's culture according to the counsellor's own understandings and pre-conceptions; the counsellor, in turn, attributed Ava's presenting issues to Ava's culture, as opposed to her personal experiences and transitional challenges. This participant's experience seems to caution counsellors against shifting from a "position of cultural blindness" where culture in counselling is not addressed to the "position of over-applying cultural hypotheses" where it is presumed that cultural membership and culture are the primary reasons for the clients' presenting issues (Collins & Arthur, 2007, p. 38).

Ava's education in the field of counselling and previous positive counselling experiences may have served to buffer against the negative effects of the counselling she described in this study. Put another way, it is possible that another student may have had a different experience

without this buffer and may have not been able to overcome the potential strain related to a counsellor's cultural pre-conceptions on the therapeutic relationship.

Contrary to Ava's experience of culture in sessions, Hasti expressed satisfaction with her counsellor's cultural sensitivity and competency. Hasti did not view the counsellor's curiosity and interest about her culture negatively, which, in turn, allowed her to disclose more openly. In this case, the counsellor appeared to demonstrate awareness of the client's culture and explored the client's culture from a "non-judgemental stance," which is consistent with the second domain—cultural awareness of clients—in Collins and Arthur's (2007) multicultural competency framework (p. 38). In addition, consistent with the third domain of the multicultural competency framework, Hasti's counsellor appeared to have established a culturally sensitive working alliance, which, in turn, appeared to have provided Hasti with a more trusting and safe context where she felt comfortable disclosing further.

It is noteworthy that when the participants were asked to reflect on culture in their counselling sessions, only Sam, who is from Mexico, spoke of cultural similarities with the counsellor. Sam expressed difficulty in recognizing his counsellor's level of cultural awareness or even how his culture could be made known to his counsellor.

Sam felt a certain degree of resonance and congruence with his counsellor and the host culture. He attributed his lack of adjustment difficulties to his ability to speak French, which is one of two recognized languages in his province of residence. He also cited his Western-like lifestyle and upbringing. This is also consistent with the findings in the literature that international students from "English speaking and Westernized countries" may experience fewer dissimilarities and difficulties with the host cultures (Nilsson et al., 2004, p. 50; Pederson, 1991a). Overall, Sam's experiences are reflected in the observations that "the greater the

difference between home and host culture, the greater the adjustment demands faced by international students” (Nilsson et al., 2004; Pederson, 1991a; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004, p. 127). Contrary to this participant’s experience, the other two participants reported perceiving significant differences with their counsellors. For instance, the first participant, Ava, identified her counsellor as “White” and “Canadian” and was concerned whether the counsellor would be able to relate to her and understand her problems. This is also consistent with the findings from a narrative study where a participant was unsure that a Western counsellor would be able to relate to international students’ problems and understand their cultural differences (Brinson & Kottler, 1995). As suggested by Popadiuk and Arthur (2004) and depicted by the contrasting experiences of Sam and Ava, not all international students experience cross-cultural challenges and differences to the same degree.

Integrative Etic-Emic Framework

The importance of emic and etic perspectives has been emphasized in cross-cultural counselling and research (Varjas et al., 2005). It has also been suggested that counsellors’ knowledge of each perspective, as well as awareness of their own cultural values and of their clients, influence their understanding and practice of multicultural counselling (Arthur & Collins, 2010).

The presence of culture in counselling was viewed differently by each participant and for those who did experience cultural differences in sessions; the counsellors’ style appeared to range from focusing on cultural membership and the participants’ unique worldviews to focusing solely on cultural group membership. For instance, one of the participants, Ava, questioned her counsellor’s level of cultural awareness and competency and felt hesitant to disclose further. The counsellor’s approach, as described by Ava, appeared to reflect the emic stance, where the

counsellor attributed Ava's presenting problems to her cultural background and "Iranian" group membership as opposed to her adjustment difficulties. Ava's experience also demonstrates that negative client experiences, such as feeling offended and questioning the counsellor's ability to understand the client's presenting problems, can arise when a counsellor assumes the client's presenting concerns are culture-based.

Contrary to Ava's experience, Hasti's counsellor appeared to apply an integrated etic-emic approach as they seemed to acknowledge the uniqueness within Hasti's culture, reflecting the etic approach, as well as focus on Hasti's Iranian cultural group membership, reflecting the emic perspective. As a consequence, Hasti felt more understood, comfortable, and confident in disclosing further. Therefore, while working with international students, it would appear therapeutically beneficial for counsellors to integrate an etic-emic approach into their practice, which considers both the client's cultural values as well as their unique worldviews (Arthur, 2004).

Termination and Future Counselling.

Even though the literature suggests that international students tend to terminate their counselling sessions prematurely (Arthur, 2004; Dipeolu et al., 2007; Mori, 2000; Yakushko et al., 2008), participants in the current study either completed their counselling sessions or were referred to more specialized services. For these participants, termination was planned and mutually decided upon. More specifically, these participants did not leave counselling prematurely due to their dissatisfaction with counselling services or, in one case, a perceived lack of cultural awareness by the counsellor. In fact, for all three students, the counselling experience was satisfactory enough to consider seeking and attending counselling in the future. Although not directly indicated by the participants, it is worth speculating that the participants' completion

of counselling and willingness to seek counselling in the future have been influenced by their (a) previous positive counselling experiences, (b) most recent experiences at a university counselling setting, (c) met needs and expectations through engaging in the counselling process, and/or (d) education and training in the field of counselling, all of which may also have heightened their understanding and commitment to counselling process.

Client Recommendations

The participants in this study were invited to share their recommendations for counsellors working with international students. Questions related to client recommendations were included in the semi-structured interview protocol as a natural progression of the course of, and conclusion to, the interview. While emanating from counselling experiences, compared to other questions included in the interview protocol this set of questions did not directly focus on participants' experience of counselling. For the purpose of this study, giving voice to participants during the interview regarding recommendations served an additional means to learn about positive counselling experiences and counselling needs from the perspective of international students. Given the slightly different nature to these interview questions, responses were not included in the data analysis of actual counselling experiences and are presented separately below.

Participants in this study were invited to share their recommendations for counsellors working with international students at university counselling settings. In response, they also voluntarily shared and articulated their suggestions and recommendations for international students, university counselling services, and universities in general. These participants saw value in counsellors who appreciate the importance of culture and cultural differences when counselling international students. Participants also encouraged counsellors to explore

international students' counselling goals and expectations while considering these students' cultural backgrounds.

In terms of recommendations specifically for international students, all participants in this study agreed on the benefits of counselling for international students. They encouraged other international students to seek counselling despite all the stereotypes and stigmas that may be attached to utilizing counselling services in various cultures (Raunic & Xenos, 2008; Seo, 2005; Yeh & Inose, 2003). For instance, one of the participants from Iran also emphasized that experiencing adjustment difficulties is "normal" and seeking counselling is not a "taboo." One of the participants advised international students to "educate" their counsellors about their respective culture and explain their perceived cultural differences with their counsellors.

When discussing recommendations specific to university counselling services, participants spoke about the importance of accessing information related to counselling services and identified certain information as helpful. For instance, it was suggested that counselling services should provide international students with information regarding their fees and services. They also suggested that counselling services should make counsellors' professional profiles and specializations available to clients so that clients could choose a counsellor who matches their counselling needs.

All three participants were eager to share their experiences as international students and advocate for other international students by providing recommendations they perceived as helpful for universities. One participant recommended that universities "educate" international students about the existence of counselling services and assist them in becoming familiar with the available resources and services. Another participant spoke about the advantages of establishing "coaching services" for international students.

The participants in this study also enthusiastically provided recommendations for universities at large. Among the most salient are universities' roles in (a) assisting international students with expanding their social network and establishing social ties, (b) providing opportunities other than English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to help international students develop their conversational skills, and (c) following up with international students after their arrival in Canada and helping them with "everyday problems." Although these recommendations may appear to be beyond the typical mandate of the counsellor, a social justice approach would minimally endorse that counsellors understand some of the barriers that may interfere with international students' successful access to resources that may assist with their wellbeing. A social justice perspective would also encourage counsellors to work closely with other university services to learn about various resources that are available to international students. This collaboration may provide counsellors with an opportunity to recognize and acknowledge international students' needs, while also playing a critical role in advocating for this population to help convey their needs and concerns to the university (Lewis, Ratts, Paladino, & Toporek, 2011).

Implications for Counsellors and University Counselling Services

In-depth interviews elicited international students' experience of counselling at a university counselling setting and illuminated some interesting findings that may have important implications for counsellors, particularly related to international students' perceptions of culture in counselling. Participants accentuated the significance of culture-infused counselling and multicultural counselling competency. In addition, there was a clear expectation that counsellors respect and appreciate international students' cultures, and be willing to learn about their cultures.

However, an interesting contradiction may emerge in a counsellor's attempt to exercise cultural sensitivity. A counsellor's seeking more information from the client about their culture could expose the counsellor's lack of cultural knowledge, whereas not acquiring the relevant cultural information to make meaningful connections in the counselling may predispose the counsellor to stereotyping the client or generalizing their experiences. Indeed, this should be broached with care and caution to avoid undue tension in the therapeutic relationship.

Counsellors might do well to first "research" a client's cultural background for their own learning and, to avoid stereotyping or generalizing, draw from this information internally while "taking the client's lead" when responding to in-session moments that may require improved cultural understanding or that are culturally relevant to the therapeutic process. This might begin to reflect an integrative etic-emic orientation where the counsellor *both* possesses general knowledge about a client's culture (emic) *and* applies this knowledge only as it relates to the client's unique experience (etic). Ava and Hasti's experiences of culture in counselling remind us of the benefits of this more balanced and inclusive etic-emic approach where both clients' cultural group membership—*as well as* their unique worldviews within their cultural groups—are considered and respected when working cross-culturally with international students.

It may also be of value to counsellors to incorporate multicultural competencies when working with international students from different cultural backgrounds. Collin and Arthur's multicultural competency framework includes three domains: awareness of self, awareness of client's culture, and a culturally sensitive relationship (Collins & Arthur, 2007; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Indeed, Collins and Arthur (2007) heed Canadian counsellors to attend to such competencies when working with clients from various cultures and backgrounds. Furthermore, counsellors' exploration and awareness of their clients' culture provides them with the

opportunity to understand how clients' "cultural identities" influence their views of counselling (Collins & Arthur, 2007). According to the third domain of multicultural competency framework, counsellors are encouraged to "establish trusting and respectful relationships with clients that take into account cultural identities" (Collins & Arthur, 2007, p. 39). In the current study, participants identified some basic counsellor qualities and characteristics, such as empathy, as important in establishing an effective and positive therapeutic relationship. More specifically, the counsellor's expression of cultural awareness appeared influential to the cross-cultural client-counsellor relationship. At the very least, counsellors conveying cultural sensitivity might be perceived more favourably compared to counsellors who demonstrate a lack of awareness specific to the client's culture.

It may be of value for counsellors to focus on the uniqueness and diversity of clients' preference for counselling approaches even within each cultural group. The onus may be on counsellors to adapt their counselling approaches to each client's preference and assume an etic perspective in response to current research's apparent overemphasis on the emic stance, which suggests that international students' preferred counselling styles (i.e., predominantly directive) can be determined based on their cultural group memberships.

In order to familiarize international students with counselling services, it may be beneficial for university counselling services to organize information sessions and workshops to provide international students with information regarding their fees and services. Considering each client's perception of culture in counselling, it is worth noting that international students likely enter counselling with a predetermined notion of what counselling should be like. Therefore, it may be helpful for counsellors working with international students to clearly discuss their clients' goals, needs, and expectations, and determine what their clients perceive as

helpful in counselling so that necessary adjustments can be implemented.

Selection Bias

Selection bias usually occurs due to selection of “extreme cases” of participants. In this case, biased estimate of findings may result (Collier & Mahoney, 1996). In the present study, selection bias may have occurred on the basis that both female participants: (a) were from an Iranian background and (b) had previous counselling training. It is worth noting that these two participants were of the same gender and culture background as the researcher. The participants’ willingness to participate in this study may have been influenced by a perception that they could relate to the researcher given the shared cultural background. It may have also influenced what they chose to disclose in the interview. In addition, these participants had received graduate-level training in counselling prior to participating in this study. It could be postulated that familiarity with the field of counselling influenced their willingness and desire to participate, and contributed to the ease with which they were able to articulate their most recent counselling experience at a university counselling setting. It could also be postulated that they possessed greater motivation and eagerness to share both their positive and negative counselling experiences during the interview. Finally, general satisfaction expressed for their most recent counselling experiences might also be attributed to their familiarity with, and prior knowledge of, the counselling process. Therefore, it is worth considering that these participants’ counselling experiences may be different from those of other international students who do not possess any counselling education and training.

Limitations of the Current Study

This research provided descriptions of international students’ experience of counselling at a university counselling setting from the perspective of three international students. Although

rich and descriptive information was obtained about their experience of counselling, the sample of the study lacked heterogeneity in terms of cultural background. It may be of value to consider including voices of international students from different cultural backgrounds in future studies. Coincidentally, two of the three participants in the current study were of the same gender and cultural background as the researcher; therefore, it is worth considering whether the researcher's gender and cultural background influenced these participants' decision to participate in the current study and what/how to disclose about their counselling experiences.

As outlined in the results section, the two female participants were from Iran and they both had education and training in the field of counselling. Possessing such specialized education and professional training in counselling was coincidental and is likely "atypical" of the international student demographic. It could be postulated that these participants' cultural and education background unveiled counselling experiences that were unique to these two participants. Results may therefore not reflect experiences of international students from other cultural backgrounds and programs of study. However, it is important to acknowledge that these participants still provided unique contributions to the phenomenon regardless of their cultural background, programs of study, and educational training.

Even though three to five participants are deemed appropriate for determining thematic patterns in qualitative research (Morrow, 2005), the three participants in this study appeared to have varied counselling experiences. More in-depth interview and interviews with additional participants may allow for a thicker description of current themes, and for additional themes and unique experiences related to culture to emerge.

Participants were recruited from counselling services at two universities in the same city in Eastern Canada. Consequently, the results of this study may not reflect experiences of

international students at other university counselling settings across Canada. Geographic representation of international students and the extent to which universities are attuned to the needs of international students, generally and for specific cultural groups, could reflect on the counselling services, which in turn may impact these students' counselling experiences.

Although there were limitations to this study, the findings that spoke directly to the observed expression of counsellor cultural awareness in counselling may inform us further about international students' experiences compared to previous studies whereby student experiences seem largely captured and understood through an emic-based lens. Furthermore, the practical implications of the findings for this study could inform future studies, sensitize counsellors to cultural considerations, speak to specific needs of international students and ways to address those needs, and inform programming and counsellor education and training for those working specifically with this population.

Recommendations for Future Research

Within-person and between-person analyses were conducted to analyze the data for themes, clusters of meaning, and in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon under study. Themes and clusters of meaning that emerged from this study can be used in future research to direct more relevant studies, and to guide the development and improvement of university counselling services for international students. It may also be helpful to explore in greater depth client perceptions of culture in counselling sessions, with a specific focus on the integrated etic-emic approach, and how counsellors navigate cultural awareness when working with international students from different cultural backgrounds.

Future studies on therapeutic relationship in counselling international students may focus on exploring factors such as counsellor characteristics and cultural awareness that may be

effective in building and shaping a positive therapeutic relationship.

There is a body of research focusing on counselling approaches preferred by international students; however, it has primarily explored the preferences of Asian students for “directive” counselling. More etic-focused research could continue to illuminate our understanding of international students’ counselling preferences beyond ethnicity, particularly how other factors implied in this study’s findings, such as gender or education, may shape students’ experiences.

Future studies may also focus on international students’ attitude towards counselling to determine factors such as family influence, previous counselling experiences, and field of education and training that may motivate or hinder their decision to seek counselling. Future researchers may also aim to recruit more international students with diverse characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and cultural background in order to have representation of a more diverse population of international students including geographic representations across Canada.

Obtaining greater cultural representation among international students interviewed may provide a more in-depth portrayal of international students’ counselling experiences but also of counsellor cultural competencies that may be in service to international students.

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Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your date of birth?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your martial status?
4. What is your native language?
5. What is your second language?
6. What is your ethnic background?
7. What is your country of origin?
8. What was your level of education upon arrival in Canada?
9. How long have you been in Canada?
10. How long do you intend to stay in Canada?
11. What is your student status? (undergrad/grad)
12. What is your program of study?
13. What year of your program are you in?
14. Since your arrival in Canada, have you received counselling anywhere other than
counselling services at the University of Ottawa?
15. Have you received counselling in your home country?
16. How did you decide to study in Canada?
17. What has been your experience in Canada to date?
18. What were some of the challenges that you faced upon your arrival in Canada?
19. What has been the impact of such difficulties on you?
20. How did you handle those challenges before attending counselling?

21. How did you decide to go to counselling?

22. What brought you to counselling?

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Before counselling (difficulties, assistance-seeking)

1. What were your understandings/expectations about counselling prior to going in?
2. What were some of your personal struggles in going to counselling?
3. Who did/did not support you in going to counselling? Who did you tell? (Why/Why not?)

During counselling (process, counsellor, relationship, termination)

4. How would you describe your counselling experience?
5. How did you imagine counselling would be?
6. How did counselling fit with your expectations?
7. How did counselling depart from your expectations?
8. How often did you meet your counsellor?
9. What did you do in the sessions?
10. How personal or intimate was the focus of the sessions?
11. What was the nature of the session (focus on feelings, cognitions, etc...)?
12. How directive/non-directive were the counselling sessions?
13. How was the counselling/therapeutic relationship between you and your counsellor?
14. Tell me about cultural differences, if any, between you and your counsellor.
15. Tell me about “culturally understanding” between you and your counsellor.
16. Tell me whether you think your counsellor understood you in general.
17. What surprised you in counselling?
18. What did you find most helpful?
19. What did you find least helpful?

20. How did counselling end for you?

After counselling (post-termination, recommendations)

21. What would you have liked your counselling experience to be like?

22. What would you have liked more of?

23. What would you have liked less of?

24. What would you want your counsellor to know about working with you specifically?

25. What would you want your counsellor to know about working with international students in general?

26. How much do you think counselling assisted you?

27. How do you think you have adjusted to your new situation?

28. Would you return for counselling in the future?

29. What would you suggest to make the transition easier for other international students coming to study in Canada?

30. Is there anything else you would like to say about your counselling experience?

Appendix C

English Recruitment Text

University of Ottawa, Faculty of Education (Educational Counselling)

Participants Needed for Research in Counselling

I am looking for three to five volunteers to participate in a study on international students' experience of counselling in university settings in Canada. If you agree to participate, you will be invited to an interview session to share with me what it was like for you to be in counselling. The potential participants will be selected on a first-come, first-served basis. The interview will be arranged at a time that is convenient for you and could take up to two hours.

In order to participate in this study you need to be an international student who:

- a) *has come to Canada to pursue university studies,*
- b) *has attended counselling in a university counselling setting in Canada,*
- c) *has completed counselling within the past 12 months, and*
- d) *is 18 years or older.*

For your participation in the study, you will receive a \$20 coffee shop gift card as compensation even if you choose to withdraw from the study. For more information regarding this study, or to participate in this study, please contact Setareh Najmi.

Appendix D

French Recruitment Text

Université d'Ottawa, Faculté d'éducation (Counseling éducationnel)

Je suis à la recherche de trois à cinq bénévoles intéressés à participer dans une étude concernant les expériences des étudiants internationaux envers le counseling dans le cadre des universités au Canada. Si vous acceptez de participer, vous serez invité(e)s à entreprendre une entrevue dans le but de partager avec moi vos expériences. Les participant(e)s potentiel(le)s seront sélectionné(e)s sur la base du premier arrivé, premier servi. L'entrevue sera organisée à un moment qui vous convient et pourra nécessiter jusqu'à deux heures.

Afin de participer à cette étude vous devez être un(e) étudiant(e) internationale qui:

- e) *est venu(e) au Canada afin de poursuivre des études universitaires,*
- f) *s'est engagé(e) dans le counseling dans un cadre universitaire au Canada,*
- g) *a complété leur counseling dans les 12 derniers mois, et*
- h) *a 18 ans ou plus.*

Pour votre participation, vous recevrez une carte-cadeau pour café de \$20 comme compensation même si vous choisissez de vous retirer de l'étude. L'étude sera en anglais et les participant(e)s doivent donc être à l'aise dans la langue. Pour plus d'informations concernant cette étude ou votre participation dans cette étude, s'il vous plaît rejoindre Setareh Najmi.

Appendix E

Study Description for the Participants

Dear Student:

This is to invite you to be a participant in a research project conducted by Setareh Najmi who is pursuing a Masters degree in Educational Counselling at the University of Ottawa.

This research project focuses on international students' counselling experiences. If you agree to participate, you will be invited to an interview session with the researcher to share your counselling experiences as an international student. It is anticipated that this research project will be of benefit to international students, educators, and counsellors working in support services at universities. Results of this research will help the researcher, university counsellors, and educators get a better understanding of international students' counselling experiences.

If you agree to participate, the interview will be arranged at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will be held in a private meeting room at University of Ottawa and will take approximately two hours. With your consent, the interview will be audio-taped to help the researcher access the interview discussion for transcription and data analysis.

Your participation is completely voluntary. Also, all information will be kept strictly confidential and you can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. For your participation in the study, you will receive a \$20 coffee shop gift card as compensation even if you choose to withdraw from the study. If you decide that you no longer want to participate in the study, all information obtained from you will be destroyed. Should any concerns arise from discussing your experiences during the interview that you wish to discuss further with a counsellor; the researcher will suggest individuals that you may contact.

If you would like to participate in this study or have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Setareh Najmi or my supervisor Dr. Cristelle Audet.

Respectfully,

Setareh Najmi

Appendix F

Consent Form for Study Participation

Consent Form for Participation in Qualitative Exploration of International Students' Experience of Counselling

Faculty of Education (Educational Counselling), University of Ottawa

I, _____, am aware that the purpose of this study is to deepen our understanding of counselling experiences from the perspective of international students. Through the use of an interview format, I will be asked to describe my experience of counselling in as much detail as possible. I am aware that this research project will be of benefit to international students, educators, and counsellors working in support services at universities. Results of this research will help the researcher, university counsellors, and educators get a better understanding of international students' counselling experiences. I understand that the present study is being conducted as part of a Masters Degree thesis requirement by Setareh Najmi under the supervision of Dr. Cristelle Audet of the Department of Educational Counselling at the University of Ottawa.

I agree to participate in the study and I am willing to share my experiences with the interviewer. I am aware that as part of the data collection process one interview of approximately two hours in length will be audio-tape recorded and will be transcribed for later analysis. I understand that I will also be provided with a summary of the interview and themes. I realize that my participation in the interview is completely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If I choose to withdraw from the study, any information about me or any data that I provide will be destroyed immediately. I understand that for my participation in the study, I will receive a \$20 coffee shop gift card as compensation even if I choose to withdraw from the study.

I am also aware that if discussion of my experiences raises any concern for me that I wish to discuss further with a counsellor, Setareh Najmi will suggest individuals that I might contact. Should none of these resources meet my needs, I may contact the researcher for additional resources.

I am aware that all information associated with this study is strictly confidential and that my identity, or that of any persons that I mention, will be known only to the researcher and will not be revealed at any time. When transcribing the interview recordings, the researcher will use pseudonyms (i.e., false names) for my name for those of any persons that I mention. The pseudonyms will also be used in writing the thesis manuscript and any related publications or presentations. Any details in the interview recordings that might identify me or any persons that I mention will also be changed during the transcribing. Quotes may be used from my transcript; however, no information that can identify me will appear in the quotes. Furthermore, the researcher and researcher's supervisor will be the only persons with access to the audio-tape recordings and interview transcripts. These will be stored in a secure place for five years after which time they will be destroyed.

I am aware that information obtained from the interview will be used by the researcher solely for the purposes outlined. I also understand that the results of this study may be disseminated through conferences and publications.

I am also aware that any inquiries about the research study should be addressed to: Dr. Cristelle Audet or Setareh Najmi.

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher

Researcher Bracketing

As a newcomer to this country, I remember attending counselling and seeking professional help with regard to my academic choices at the time. My assumptions and presuppositions about counselling led me to believe that counselling was a safe and comforting environment where the counsellor was empathic, understanding, and helpful. Being aware of the fact that English was my second language, I was hesitant to seek help, thinking that I was not fluent enough to voice my concerns and ask for help. Also, due to my personal beliefs that I should be able find solutions to my own problems, I did not consider seeking help from anyone outside of my family. However, a former teacher recommended counselling when she found out that I was struggling with making decisions and choosing the right program of study. I finally sought counselling and presented my indecisiveness in changing programs as my presenting issue. The experience of counselling did not exceed my expectations and I left feeling that I was not heard or understood.

After having completed a standardized scale, I was given a list of programs/occupations to choose from and make my decisions accordingly. Counselling was terminated after the second session, not by my choice, but by the counsellor's decision. Since my counselling experience, I found myself becoming more and more motivated and interested in the process of counselling and change, and specifically providing counselling services to international students. Years later, after enrolling in a Master's degree program at the University of Ottawa, I became interested in studying international students' experiences of counselling.

I believe that building therapeutic alliance, collaboration, and understanding are important in therapy, especially when working with international students. Clients' characteristics, cultural background, counselling style preferences, needs and expectations ought

to be considered in order to provide meaningful and relevant interventions. I respect and endorse the humanistic view and believe that every client, regardless of his/her background, needs to be heard, empathized with, and respected.

My presuppositions and biases about counselling as I have come to understand and realize them through my personal experiences, beliefs, understandings, values, professional training, and the review of the literature are as follows:

1. International students are reluctant to seek counselling due to language inefficiency, personal and cultural beliefs, values, and beliefs that they can solve their own problems.
2. International students' views and expectations of counselling tend to be negative and unsatisfactory.
3. International students' view of counsellors can impact their experience of counselling.

In addition, I am a novice qualitative researcher and I am concerned that my lack of experience in qualitative research may impact the collection and analysis of data. I also understand that conducting interviews requires specific skills in establishing a therapeutic alliance and providing a safe and comforting environment for the participants where they can share their experiences. I hope that my previous counselling experiences will help me with building rapport with the participants. To address these concerns, I conducted a pilot study in which I interviewed one participant and asked about their experience of counselling and challenges faced as an international student. By conducting the pilot study, I was able to identify the areas in my research that required more attention, modification, and development.