

Change Processes in School-Based Counselling: A Hong Kong Study

by

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Statement of Originality

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Mark Gregory HARRISON

March 2019

Thesis Examination Panel Approval

Abstract

A large body of research suggests that counselling is an effective intervention for adolescents experiencing psychological distress. Little is understood about the processes taking place in such counselling, however. School-based counselling in Hong Kong is not well developed or researched, despite having the potential to be a valuable intervention. The present study sought to investigate the processes taking place in school-based counselling in Hong Kong and the ways in which the Chinese sociocultural context and the school setting influences these processes.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 Hong Kong Chinese senior students and 8 counsellors across three different schools. Data were analysed thematically within a critical realist framework, allowing shared meanings to be reported with an emphasis on causal mechanisms and the influence of context. Two thematic domains were developed from the data which captured the experience of both students and counsellors.

The first thematic domain was labelled *relationship in context* and consisted of four themes: counselling embedded within the school and the culture; the pre-counselling stage; building a counselling relationship; and an ongoing but limited source of support. After experiencing initial fear and uncertainty, students quickly established a strong and stable relationship with their counsellor. Counsellors' embeddedness into the school enabled them to act as an ongoing source of support, which students valued but which could also foster dependency. Seeing counsellors as authority figures, being unwilling to disclose personal information outside the family and stigma related to mental health issues were traditional cultural perspectives which heightened students' fears related to attending counselling. Trust was an essential precursor of developing a

counselling relationship in which the counsellor was perceived as warm, non-judgmental, caring and empathic.

The second thematic domain was labelled *change processes*, and three such processes were identified. In the first, labelled *new ways of thinking*, students developed insight into their thinking and became more realistic about and accepting of their problems. This led to increased optimism and resourcefulness. In the second change process, *developing better relationships*, students learned to connect with other people better through practising communication, developing social skills and learning to empathise. This connection enabled students to value their relationships more, to become more accepting of other people and to experience greater self-advocacy in relationships. Finally, in *experiencing positive emotions and increasing self-efficacy*, students experienced positive emotions as a result of being able to talk and feeling that they were understood and accepted, and this led to a better mood, greater confidence and a feeling of ease which, in turn, allowed them to be more focused at school. The change processes were not mutually exclusive, and there were differences in the way students experienced them.

The study's findings allowed several recommendations for counsellors and administrators to be made. In particular, a sensitivity to the sociocultural context and the embeddedness of counsellors in the school organisation is essential to the effective implementation of school-based counselling in Hong Kong.

Keywords: School-based counselling, change processes, thematic analysis, critical realism.

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For reasons of confidentiality, the counsellors and students who participated in the study cannot be named, but I am moved by the trust they placed in me and am deeply grateful for their willingness to reveal something of themselves: their insights form the substance of this study. I also wish to thank the principals who gave me access to their schools, also an act of great trust.

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List of Abbreviations

ACT	Acceptance and commitment therapy
ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
APCPA	Asian Professional Counselling and Psychology Association
ASCA	American School Counselor Association
BACP	British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
CBA	Controlled before and after
CBT	Cognitive behavioural therapy
DfCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual
DSS	Direct Subsidy Scheme
GTM	Grounded theory method
HKPCA	Hong Kong Professional Counselling Association
HKSCP	Hong Kong Society of Counselling and Psychology
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
MRT	Mid-range theory
P.A.T.H.S.	Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes
PCT	Person-centred therapy
PCE	Person-centred and experiential
PIS	Private independent school
PSHE	Personal social and health education
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RCT	Randomised control trial
SAMHSA	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SBA	Simple before and after
SBC	School-based counselling
SBHC	School-based humanistic counselling
SEAL	Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning
SED	Serious Emotional Disturbance

SES	Socioeconomic status
TaMHS	Targeted Mental Health in Schools
WHO	World Health Organisation

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

This chapter begins with a survey of the mental health problems experienced by secondary school students¹ globally and in Hong Kong. Programmes adopted by schools to support students' mental health are described, and school-based counselling is introduced as a key component of such programmes. A discussion of the terms *counselling* and *school-based counselling* (SBC), particularly as they are practised in Hong Kong, follows. Theoretical approaches to counselling commonly used in school-based settings are discussed along with the research which has been conducted into these approaches. The place of counselling as part of holistic school guidance programmes is examined and defined, and the relative underdevelopment of SBC in Hong Kong is discussed. The aims of the study and the research questions are given.

¹ The terms 'students,' 'young people,' 'adolescents,' and 'clients' are widely and interchangeably used in the literature. For the purposes of this thesis, 'adolescents' refers to all young people aged 11-18, 'students' is used to describe adolescents in a school setting, and 'clients' is used to refer to people of any age undergoing counselling. 'Student' will be used to describe the adolescents receiving counselling in the schools participating in this study. Inevitably, there will be some overlap in the use of these terms.

1.2 Context: The mental health of adolescents

1.2.1 The mental health of adolescents globally

The growing incidence of mental health problems in adolescents is an increasingly significant concern in developed countries. The 2013 Stress in America Survey (American Psychological Association, 2014) reported that the chronic levels of stress in teenagers exceed those of adults, and a large-scale study has estimated that half of all mental health problems in adults in the US have their origins in childhood and adolescence (Kessler et al., 2005). A study in the UK has suggested that up to 20% of children there experience a mental disorder (McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2005). The types of mental health problems experienced by young people include anxiety, depression and conduct disorders (Polanczyk, Salum, Sugaya, Caye, & Rohde, 2015). Merikangas, Nakamura, and Kessler (2009) estimate that one in every three to four adolescents meets a lifetime criterion for a Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) mental disorder, and that around one in ten adolescents meets the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) criteria for a Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED). Adolescent non-suicidal self-injury (Brooks, 2015; Duggan, Heath, Toste, & Ross, 2011), and suicide (McLoughlin, Gould, & Malone, 2015) are significant consequences of mental health problems. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2014) has called for a stronger global focus on adolescent mental health, citing depression as the primary cause of disability in teenagers and suicide as one of the most prominent causes of death in this age group.

1.2.2 The mental health of adolescents in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, as in other parts of the world, adolescents are increasingly experiencing high levels of psychological distress. In a survey of 15,560 secondary school students conducted by the Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service (2017), 53% of respondents reported symptoms of depression, an increase of 2-3% compared with surveys conducted in previous years. Older secondary school students were 6-11% more likely to experience symptoms of depression than younger students. Around 20% of respondents reported suicidal thoughts, and 1.4% had recurring suicidal ideation or had attempted suicide. A quarter of respondents reported symptoms of anxiety. Norquist and Magruder (2008) report that, in over 90% of cases, individuals committing suicide have mental health issues. Increased media attention on young people committing suicide in recent years led the Education Bureau to commission a report into the prevalence and causes of adolescent suicide (Education Bureau Committee on Prevention of Student Suicides, 2016). The suicide rate per 100,000 people between the ages of 15 and 24 in Hong Kong has been rising in recent years, being 6.2 in 2014, 8.4 in 2015 and 9.5 in 2016 (Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, n.d.).

In school settings, issues which may be sources of psychological distress include bullying and victimisation, cyberbullying, internet addiction, eating disorders and substance abuse (Askill-Williams, Cefai, & Fabri, 2013; Cheng & Chan, 2007; Cui, Cheng, Xu, Chen, & Wang, 2011; Lester & Cross, 2014; Nordahl, Beran, & Dittrick, 2013; Shek, Ma, & Sun, 2011; Sun & Shek, 2010). Rates of internet addiction among adolescent boys, for example, have been reported to be as high as 26.8% (Shek & Yu, 2016), and problematic use of video games has been associated

with increased levels of depression and anxiety (Mentzoni et al., 2011). Suicidal ideation is more common in Hong Kong adolescents than in teenagers from Western cultures (Lee, Wong, Chow, & McBride-Chang, 2006), and life satisfaction is lower among Asian late-adolescents than those in Western countries (Gnilka, Ashby, Matheny, Chung, & Chang, 2015).

The reasons for a high level of psychopathology among Hong Kong adolescents may be related to the sociocultural context. Several stressors have been identified in the literature, most saliently an increasingly materialistic orientation, a strong emphasis on academic work and pressure from parents and teachers to achieve high academic scores, family quarrels, non-intact families, financial disadvantage and parental and sibling conflict (Law & Shek, 2016; Ngai & Cheung, 2000; Shek, et al., 2011). The importance of humility as a traditional Chinese cultural value is often manifested as shaming by parents and an emphasis on perfectionism (Wang, Yuen, & Slaney, 2009). The relationships between mental health and sociocultural values are complex, however, and also appear to be related to gender (Lam et al., 2004). In one study, adolescents who embraced traditional Chinese cultural beliefs about adversity had better psychological wellbeing, better adjustment to school and less problematic behaviour (Shek, 2004) and in another, filial piety – the idea that children should show deference to and look after their parents – was found to have a protective effect (Chan et al., 2009). A strong emphasis on the importance of family harmony can, however, be a source of distress (Lee et al., 2006). Secondly, the political, economic and social landscapes of Hong Kong are changing fast and may be influencing the ways in which adolescents experience stress. The so-called ‘umbrella revolution’ of late 2014 (Ortmann, 2015), for example, may have influenced adolescents’ experience of stress: Lau et al. (2017) conclude that increased politicisation in Hong Kong may have become

“a persistent structural risk factor negatively affecting population mental health” (p. 525).

Thirdly, milestones associated with the transition into adulthood – the completion of formal education, starting work, getting married and starting a family – are taking place later (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006) and *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2007) is a developmental period with its own increasingly prevalent stresses (Cairns, Massfeller, & Deeth, 2010; Lisznyai, Vida, Németh, & Benczúr, 2014). Finally, mental health issues are, to some extent, stigmatised in Hong Kong (Chow, 2015; Tsang, Tam, Chan, & Cheung, 2003), and this may lead to a culture where mental health issues and their effects are pathologised, compounding their influence.

1.3 School support for students' wellbeing

The mental health of secondary school students is increasingly becoming part of schools' remit, and frameworks for addressing the wellbeing of students have become important components of school provision. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2012) has developed a National Model based on a comprehensive approach to developmental guidance, and an *International Model for School Counseling Programmes* (Fazler & Brown, 2011) has been developed based on this model for use in schools around the world. The model recommends that schools should provide a guidance curriculum, responsive services including individual and group counselling, and systems support such as professional development for and consultation to teachers. In the UK, the *Targeted Mental Health in Schools* (TaMHS, Figure 1.1) model has broadly similar aims and consists of three so-called waves of intervention. Wave 1 is comprised of whole school frameworks for promoting mental health based on social and emotional aspects

of learning (SEAL) programmes. Wave 2 consists of skills-focused interventions such as delivering SEAL programmes to small groups of children who have a particular need to develop social and emotional skills. Wave 3 consists of therapeutic interventions such as individual and small group counselling. All these models consist of preventative and interventional levels of support, the latter generally comprising counselling interventions.

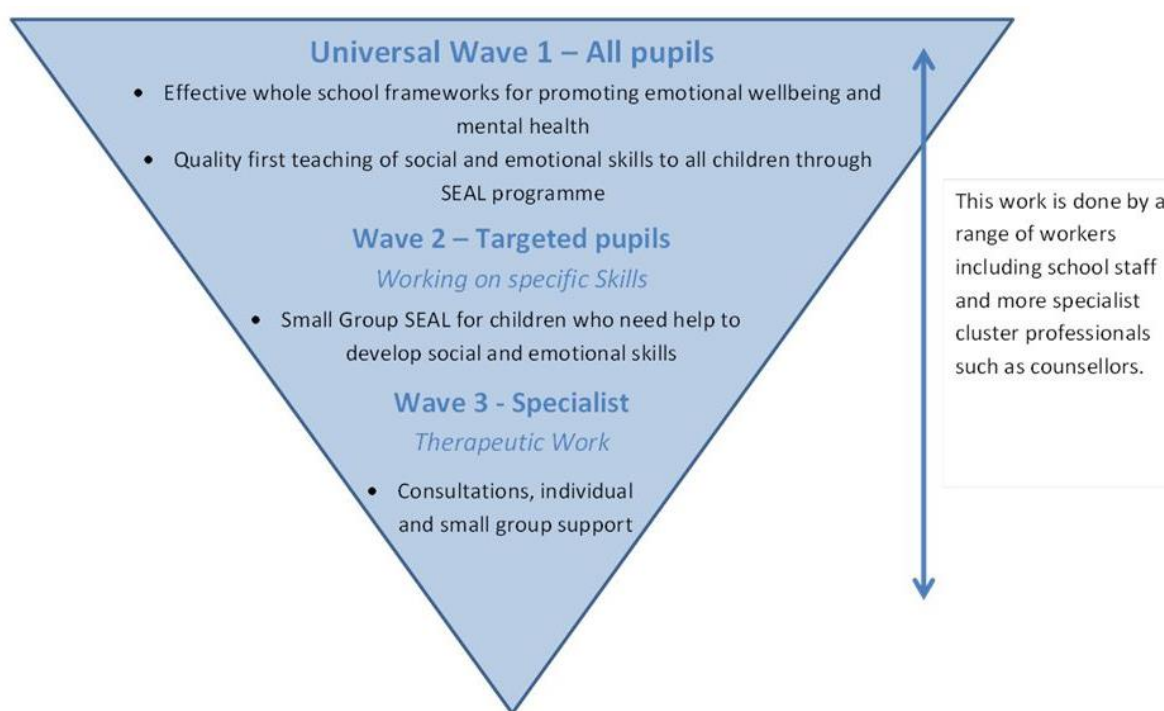


Figure 1.1. Targeted mental health in schools (TaMHS) model (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DfCSF], 2010)

Often referred to collectively as ‘local schools’ in Hong Kong, government schools, aided schools and direct subsidy scheme (DSS) schools adopt a whole-school approach to addressing students’ wellbeing which is holistic and integrated, as outlined in the Education Bureau’s

Comprehensive Student Guidance Service (Education Bureau, 2015). This reflects a culture where students' personal, moral and social development have traditionally been part of teachers' remit, in addition to their academic role. The Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Programs in schools aim to be preventative, proactive and developmental, and represent a shift in emphasis from the remedial and reactive practices of former policy (Yuen, Lau, & Chan, 2000). Schools are encouraged to adopt a philosophy of so-called invitational education (Ng, 2013), the objective of which is to help students feel "successful, valued, motivated, and personally connected to their schools, peers, and their teachers" (Yuen, Chan, & Lee, 2014, p. 104). Programmes such as Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes), which seek to promote emotional competence and self-efficacy (Shek, Zhu, & Liang, 2016) have also become popular in Hong Kong schools (Shek & Ng, 2010; Shek & Wu, 2016) and have generally been found to have a positive effect on the wellbeing of students (Shek & Wu, 2016).

1.4 School-based counselling

Research suggests that holistic mental health programmes in schools, where teachers play a role in assisting students with social and emotional difficulties can be most effective if teachers are well supported by trained, professional counsellors (Hearne & Galvin, 2015; Kourkoutas & Giovazolias, 2015; Kyriacou, 2015). The US, UK and International models cited above all include a so-called responsive service or therapeutic intervention component, where students receive individual or small group counselling to address personal concerns, relationship issues or

developmental issues. School-based counselling (SBC), where a student meets with an individual, trained counsellor several times in a school setting, is one of the most common forms of psychological therapy for school students in the UK (Cooper, 2013) and is also well developed in the US.

Corey (2015) sees counselling as a collaborative process of engagement between a client and a counsellor through which healing is facilitated through dialogue, where solutions to problems are co-constructed and where change occurs in both the client and counsellor through the relationship which develops. Delegates from 30 counselling organisations in the US developed a consensus definition of counselling as part of the 20/20 project: “Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals” (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014, p. 368). Cooper (2009) describes school counselling as “a non-stigmatising, accessible, and effective form of early intervention, which ensures that every young person has someone to talk to in times of trouble” (p. 138). Yee (2013) describes counselling in education as “a relationship developed between a counsellor and a person in a temporary state of indecision, confusion or distress” which can “help the individual to make his/her own decisions and choices, to resolve his/ her issues or cope with his/her distress in a realistic and meaningful way” (p. 6). In the present study, the term “counselling” refers to individual, one-on-one counselling provided by a trained counsellor, and “school-based counselling” (SBC) refers to such individual counselling taking place within a school.

Counselling in schools, however, encompasses a more diverse set of activities than a therapeutic role, and expectations of school counsellors depend very much on the cultural, national, regional, and school setting. Counsellors' duties can encompass academic guidance, career guidance, behaviour management, helping young people with personal, relationship, or family issues, assessing and managing high risk behaviour, designing and delivering aspects of the curriculum, guiding students in their applications to institutions of higher education, providing staff training in mental health issues, and managing students' educational records (Gibbons & Studer, 2011; Harris & Jeffery, 2010; Westergaard, 2013; Wilder & Ray, 2013). In a study into school counselling in an American context, Gallant and Zhao (2011) note that "school counseling is an inseparable and essential component of students' educational experiences" (p. 87). School counsellors take on a wide range of roles and are regarded by administrators as "collaborative case consultants" – working with parents, teachers and community professionals to address the wellbeing of individual students; "responsive direct service providers" – providers of a guidance curriculum and interventions in individual cases; "administrative team players" – supporting administrators in a coordinating and monitoring role, or as "innovative school leaders" (Clark & Amatea, 2004).

1.5 Counselling in Hong Kong schools with Chinese students

In Hong Kong, counselling is usually rendered in Chinese as 輔導, which connotes the giving of advice. The terms 'counselling' and 'guidance' are generally seen as being synonymous, and the two terms are often used interchangeably. There is little consensus in the literature regarding

what constitutes counselling in a Chinese context, but Hue (2016) describes school counselling as “a structured form of helping relationship” between “juniors” and “seniors” whereby a counsellor “helps individuals overcome their problems, such as confusion, indecision or distress” and whose emphasis is “largely remedial or therapeutic” (p. 6). For the purposes of the present study, the term *counselling* refers to the broad set of activities which Hue’s (2016) description encompasses within a structured relationship between a trained counsellor and a student. Contextual information about the training, experience and practices of the counsellors who participated in the present study is given in Section 3.5.2.

Counselling as a professional activity in Hong Kong is not well developed or understood. As of August 2018, just over 1,200 counsellors were registered with the Hong Kong Professional Counselling Association (HKPCA), the Asian Professional Counselling and Psychology Association (APCPA) and the Hong Kong Society of Counselling and Psychology (HKSCP) Division of Professional Counselling. Counselling in Hong Kong is often carried out by social workers, of whom some 18,000 are registered with the Social Workers Registration Board. Counselling as a profession is not legally regulated and relatively little is known about the professional counselling landscape (Pelling, 2013). Amongst the local population, counselling does not appear to have a high status, despite a growing incidence of mental health issues and an identified need for greater psychological support services in the community (Seay, 2010). A recent study on public attitudes towards counselling, for example, reported that most respondents did not know a counsellor, had no experience of counselling and were not willing to become a counselling client (Yu, Fu, Zhao, & Davey, 2010).

In a school setting, counselling is part of the holistic programme adopted by most schools in Hong Kong to address students' psychological wellbeing. In her summary of current trends in school guidance, Yee (2013) identifies three phases in the holistic programmes operated by most Hong Kong schools. The early phase of guidance is one of development and prevention; this is directed towards all students and involves all teachers and other staff at the school. The goals of the middle phase are “timely identification and counselling” (p. 9) for students experiencing problems, and Yee (2013) sees this phase as involving “guidance teachers, remedial teachers and social workers” (p. 9). Although counselling is located in this phase, professional school counsellors are not identified as being involved in its delivery. The late phase is covered by clinical psychologists with a focus on the diagnosis of psychological problems and “therapeutic treatment” (p. 9).

The absence of professional school counsellors from Yee's (2013) description is consistent with Harris's (2013; 2014) review of school-based counselling practices in the Asia-Pacific region, which notes that school counselling is not well developed in Hong Kong, though it is a mandatory part of the holistic approach to guidance. In most secondary schools in Hong Kong, the individual counselling component of the whole-school approach to addressing student wellbeing is carried out by teachers and other school personnel who make up guidance teams. Trained, professional counsellors are not generally employed (Harris, 2013; 2014). In both the US and the UK, extensive training and accreditation are required for counsellors to practise in schools (American Counseling Association, 2012; Stein & DeBerard, 2010) whereas in Hong Kong, counselling is often carried out by social workers, teachers or other para-professional staff. In the final report produced by the Education Bureau Committee on the Prevention of

Student Suicides (2016), a reaction to concerns about the incidence of suicide among Hong Kong students, no mention is made of counselling provision for students among the seventeen recommendations for addressing student suicide. This is another telling indication of the low status of SBC in Hong Kong. This lack of attention to counselling as a professional and regulated activity exemplifies the relatively low status of counselling in Hong Kong schools.

Other Asian countries have been more progressive in their utilisation of professional counselling in schools. In Singapore, for example, school counselling is recognised in government policy and legislation as a professional activity, and SBC has developed a strong identity as part of the Singaporean educational provision (Yeo & Lee, 2014). In Japan, counselling in schools is recognised as a distinct and specialist profession (Tajan, 2015).

As elsewhere, counselling agencies in Hong Kong are coming under increasing pressure to provide an evidence base for the services they provide. Yuen, Leung, and Chan (2014) suggest, for example, that research into counselling and the evaluation of counselling services should “reveal elements in counseling processes that seem essential for bringing about changes, as well as conditions under which specific counseling interventions are most effective” (p. 101).

Studies have suggested that, although the teachers in Hong Kong schools who carry out guidance and counselling (輔導) regard helping students with social and emotional difficulties as within their scope of practice, they also feel hindered in their practice in a number of ways, most notably that the training they receive to perform their counselling responsibilities is insufficient, that their workloads are too high and that support from school leadership is weak (Lam & Hui,

2010; Yuen et al., 2010; Yuen, Chan, et al., 2014). Teachers sometimes take a 120-hour certificate course in counselling skills provided by several universities, but teachers have reported that this training is not adequate for the work they are required to carry out (Chan, 2008). In a survey of Hong Kong counsellor-teachers, more than half perceived themselves as non-professionals (Leung, Leung, & Chan, 2003). This suggests that the counselling provision in schools is insufficient to meet the individual needs of students in distress. Indeed, students have reported that the lack of availability of counsellors in schools is a barrier to their accessing mental health services (Cardoso, Thomas, Johnston, & Cross, 2012). In addition to school guidance staff, educational psychologists also carry out counselling work in schools, but six to ten schools generally have to share one educational psychologist, who is expected to spend 14 days per year at each school (Yuen, Chan, et al., 2014). Counselling provision in Hong Kong local schools, in sum, is generally far from satisfactory.

Counselling is generally regarded as a positive and helpful service by teachers (Hamilton-Roberts, 2012), although no studies have been carried out into the views of teachers on the work of professional counselling services in schools in Hong Kong, probably because there is no history of such a dedicated approach where professional counselling services are carried out by specialist, trained personnel. Studies conducted in other Asian contexts suggest that such provision is broadly welcomed by teachers as a helpful intervention (Low, 2015a), although counselling is still not well integrated into the wider school community (Low, 2015b). Studies into students' perceptions of the need for counselling in Hong Kong schools are also absent in the literature, though research carried out elsewhere strongly affirms the perceived value of such provision (Cooper, 2004; Crocket, Kotzé, & Peter, 2015; Walker, 2015).

1.6 Aims of the study

The research project has the following aims.

First, the study seeks to explore the experiences of students and counsellors, and the processes taking place, in SBC in the Hong Kong secondary school context with Chinese students, about which little is known. Yuen et al. (2014) suggest that research into counselling should “reveal elements in counseling processes that seem essential for bringing about changes, as well as conditions under which specific counseling interventions are most effective” (p. 101) and, in response to this, the present study aims to provide insights into the processes taking place in SBC leading to positive change and how the sociocultural context of the schools in which counselling takes place influences these processes. Given the cultural differences between Hong Kong and the Western contexts in which most research into counselling has been carried out to date, it was anticipated that a study into counselling processes would yield insights which would be of theoretical value and contribute to a better understanding of SBC in the Hong Kong and wider Asian context.

Second, the study aims to provide insights which will be of practical value to stakeholders such as principals, counsellors and guidance teams as schools in Hong Kong seek to implement counselling services which can respond more effectively to the changing needs of students. An understanding of the outcomes and change processes taking place in SBC, and the ways in which SBC is influenced by the Hong Kong sociocultural context in schools, may be of practical

benefit to those working with young people in schools in Hong Kong, both at the level of developing policy and also at the level of service provision.

Third, the research aims to use an endogenous approach to give voice to participants, both counsellors and clients, in order to better understand their perspectives and addresses the need to take into account clients' voice in service planning. Claveirole (2004) has noted a growing recognition that young people's perspectives are important in understanding the best ways to engage with them, and J. McLeod (2011) has opined that the views of service users should be taken into account in effective service planning. The importance and uniqueness of the student's views is underlined by Hanley and Noble (2017), who note that the client's perspective in SBC is not the same as that of a teacher or caregiver, and hence posit that "we cannot approximate their views from an adult close to them" (p. 70). That the perspectives of clients do not necessarily match those of counsellors or other stakeholders has been made clear in Gibson and Cartwright's (2014) study into the narratives given by clients who had undergone SBC. The study found that accounts of counselling outcomes reported by the research participants "did not seem to match very well with the standard ways in which outcomes of counselling are reported by counselling professionals or researchers" (p. 522). The authors note that "the idea that a good counselling experience would produce a linear process of symptom improvement was not reflected in participants' accounts. This highlights a potential mismatch between medicalised understandings of outcomes in counselling and client experience" (p. 522).

A fourth aim of the research is to address the need for more methodological diversity in research into SBC. Several researchers have called for such a broadening of methods used in research into

this area. Concluding a large review of literature into SBC, McLaughlin, Holliday, Clarke and Ilie (2013) write that “[f]uture research needs to be rigorous and transparent and capture the complexity of routine practice with this client group. To address this, a wider range of research methodologies is recommended” (p. 6), and so this project will adopt a qualitative approach. Wilkins (2010) notes that “trustworthy qualitative research provides a deeper, more complex understanding of human experience than is usually achieved using quantitative methods” and “can provide an exceptionally rich account of the human condition” (p. 222). A justification for the study’s qualitative focus is developed further in the literature review and methodology chapters.

Finally, I had a personal motivation for conducting the study. Maxwell (2013) notes that personal goals are not only legitimate but an essential component of research design, and that ignoring them can constitute a validity threat. As a counsellor, administrator and director of counselling at a school in Hong Kong, I have been frustrated by the limited understanding about counselling among teachers, administrators, parents and students, and also by the lack of research into the possible benefits of counselling and the processes through which students go as they seek counselling and engage with a counselling relationship. Along with this personal motivation in conducting the research into SBC, the decision to employ qualitative methodology is also a personal one and has been instrumental to the study’s conception. As a counsellor and a teacher with a particular interest in humanistic approaches to counselling and to education, I became very interested in talking to people about their experiences and wanted to make this relationality a key part of my own research. Reflexivity has been an important element of the research process, and further discussion is given in subsequent chapters.

1.7 Research questions

The present study is concerned with the processes taking place in school counselling in the sociocultural context of Hong Kong.

The project seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the change processes experienced by Chinese adolescents and counsellors engaged in school-based counselling in Hong Kong?
2. What is the impact of the environment (the sociocultural context and the school setting) on the ways in which school-based counselling is experienced by Chinese adolescents and counsellors in Hong Kong?

1.8 Summary

Secondary school students around the world are increasingly experiencing mental health problems, and schools are responding to this situation by supporting students with holistic wellbeing programmes, of which individual and small group counselling, is a part. In Hong Kong, there is a lack of qualified and trained school counsellors, and much of the counselling taking place is carried out by social workers and other para-professionals such as teachers. The aims of this study are: to investigate the processes taking place in SBC and the ways in which the

Chinese sociocultural context of Hong Kong schools influences these processes; to provide insights which are of practical value in service planning and delivery, partly through giving voice to participants in counselling services; to add to the methodological diversity of research into SBC; and a personal desire to contribute to a better understanding and provision of counselling in Hong Kong secondary schools.

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1 Overview

This chapter begins with a description of the methodology used for the literature search. A consideration of the ways in which the Chinese sociocultural context may influence the experience of counselling in Hong Kong schools follows, and a discussion of the macro-processes through which clients pass and the change processes they experience as they engage with counselling is presented. The mechanisms leading to change hypothesised to be taking place in the counselling modalities most commonly employed by school counsellors are considered, and the factors common to all counselling approaches are then discussed. Research into students' experience of SBC and also into the perspective of school counsellors is reviewed. The need for greater understanding of the processes taking place, and also for a focus on the ways in which context influences school counselling, are identified as gaps in the literature.

2.2 Literature search methodology

Databases (PsychINFO, Web of Science and Scopus) and Google scholar were searched using relevant keywords. For example, PsychoINFO was searched using the search parameters:

counselling OR counseling AND school OR secundar OR high OR adolescen* OR youth AND experienc* OR perspective OR factor OR factors.* Articles were also sourced from the author's

professional network. In addition, 32 journals with a focus on school and adolescent counselling and developmental and educational psychology were searched manually for relevant articles.

The following screening criteria were applied to the results:

1. Age range and setting: studies involving secondary school students between ages 11 and 19, in an educational setting.
2. Type of counselling: individual counselling of a client with a single counsellor.
3. Counselling orientation: no exclusions
4. Time frame: studies published between 2000 and 2018.
5. Type of research: primary research

For the qualitative review, studies also had to be either entirely qualitative or take a mixed-methods approach to methodology with a significant qualitative component; data analysis had to conform to a discovery method with no *a priori* categories except for those derived from primary data; and research questions had to be focused on the experience of clients in counselling. In most of the studies, counselling took place in a school setting, but this was not set as an inclusion criterion due to the relatively small number of studies available. Thirteen studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis, the majority (7) being from the UK but studies were also included from New Zealand (3), Sweden (1), Hong Kong (1) and Norway (1). Two of the New Zealand studies reported on the same set of clients using the same methodology but gave different parts of the findings and so could be considered to be one study.

The scope of the literature review reflects the aims of the study. Hence, an emphasis is placed on the contextual factors which may influence the ways in which counselling is experienced, on the change processes taking place in counselling, especially in a school setting, and on research which reports the experiences of students and counsellors as they engage in counselling.

2.3 The sociocultural context for counselling in Hong Kong schools

Existing research into SBC rarely addresses the sociocultural contexts in which individuals experience counselling. From an ecological systems perspective, however, the sociocultural environment is seen as exerting a significant influence on an individual's experience and development, and the present study seeks to take into account this context. Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceives the environment in which individual experiences take place as “a nested arrangement of concentric structures, each contained within the next” (p. 22). The first of these structures is the microsystem, comprising the immediate relationships the individual encounters. The second is the mesosystem, defined as the relationships between components of the microsystem such as home, school and peer-group. Third, the exosystem consists of social systems which may not be directly experienced by individuals but which impact their experience: organisational features of schools, such as the relationship between counsellors and teachers, are examples of a component of the exosystem. Finally, the macrosystem is the wider cultural or sub-cultural context in which an experience takes place.

2.3.1 Chinese sociocultural influences on counselling in Hong Kong

From an ecological viewpoint, the sociocultural context in which counselling takes place may have an impact on a client's experience. McLeod (2013) suggests that cultural beliefs about the self along with beliefs about counselling in relation to other forms of help which may be available, such as religious guidance or family advice, could influence the ways in which counselling is experienced. Hong Kong society is strongly influenced by Confucianism, where the individual is located in the network of larger society. It is in this social context, particularly within the family, that the individual experiences growth and development (Gabrenya & Hwang, 1996; Yee, 2013). Fukuyama (1995) notes that Confucian societies are hierarchical, emphasise responsibilities over rights and freedoms and value order and respect for authority. In Confucianism, relationships are seen as asymmetrical (parent-child, teacher-student, etc.) and the network of relationships into which the individual is embedded is based on the central idea of filial piety (孝), giving deference to parents and, more generally, people in authority. Koh (2001) notes that a high regard for education and a strong work ethic are key elements in Confucian societies, and Hue (2008) summarises Confucianism as the propagation of a society predicated on harmonious relationships. Hofstede's (2011) six-dimension model of national cultures characterises Hong Kong as a collectivist, high power-distance and success-oriented society with high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty.

The centrality of the family may have an important impact on the attitudes of individuals towards counselling. Trust within families in Chinese societies is high, and individuals are less likely to disclose personal information to non-family members for reasons motivated by saving face,

maintaining social harmony and preserving hierarchical relationships (Ow & Katz, 1999).

Research suggests that this is true of adolescents in other cultural environments (Del Mauro & Williams, 2013), but in collectivist societies such as Hong Kong, individuals are more likely to turn to family members than to seek outside help, and family attitudes have a stronger influence on help-seeking behaviour (Mo & Mak, 2009). For example, a study conducted in the UK found that Chinese students showed much less interpersonal openness with people outside the family than British students (Tang, Reilly, & Dickson, 2012). Fears about confidentiality may also represent a barrier to attending counselling in a cohesive and collectivist society such as Hong Kong, where professional counselling is not well established and where there is little awareness the counsellors must adhere to codes of ethics which preclude the disclosure of confidential information. It has been suggested that Chinese people in Hong Kong value listening, since being attentive to others' needs may be regarded as a social obligation (Busiol, 2016). At the same time, people in Hong Kong value speaking less since this focuses more attention on the individual. Because of this, people may expect to receive help from others but may not actively seek it: such help giving behaviour is part of the structure of social interactions and, in this sense, the role of a counsellor in offering guidance to a student may be important.

The profound influence of Confucianism in Chinese society has several consequences which are relevant to school counselling. Secondary school students' experience of counselling in Hong Kong schools may be impacted by the local culture, and the cultural background of both counsellors and clients may change the nature of the counselling relationship to some extent, perhaps rather significantly. Although acknowledging the importance of school specific factors, Hue (2016), for example, posits that "the objective and organisation of school counselling can

only be understood by an explication of its cultural influence on its context” (p. 3). Taking what he calls an “essentialist” view of culture as “a concrete social phenomenon that represents the essential character of a particular nation,” (p. 8), Hue (2016) notes that a number of characteristics have an influence on the guidance and counselling offered in Hong Kong schools. These characteristics are as follows. First, “hierarchical human relationships” (p. 8) is a feature of Confucianist society where deference is shown to authority and relationships are often asymmetrical with one person such as a teacher or parent having a higher status than a subordinate such as a student or a child. Second, Chinese society is characterised by “collectivism and conformity” (p. 8), such that individuals tend to identify with groups and conform to normative standards. Hue (2016) suggests that these two characteristics will render the place of guidance and counselling in schools more limited than systems which promote discipline. Third, “Chinese practices of childhood socialisation” primarily consist of behaviours such as “threatening, scolding, shaming and punishment” (p. 12). As such, Hue (2016) suggests that these child-rearing practices may inform both guidance and disciplinary practices in schools. Finally, the social concept of “face” is a ubiquitous part of interactions between Chinese individuals. As part of a more indirect communication style which functions to maintain social harmony (Ng & James, 2013), it will have an effect on counselling relationships in Hong Kong schools.

Hue’s (2016) analysis of the ways in which cultural characteristics may influence counselling relationships echoes that of Kim, Atkinson and Umemoto (2001), who posit a number of ways in which a counselling relationship may be impacted when a client holds traditional Asian cultural values. The authors suggest that the client may be more comfortable in counselling when

cognitions, rather than feelings, are a focus of discussion, and also when educational and vocational topics are being discussed rather than the exploration of emotions. The client may introduce more practical, task-oriented content and may expect or solicit advice and guidance, preferring a more directive and even authoritative counselling approach, and a more structured style on the part of the counsellor may elicit greater client self-disclosure. Immediate symptom relief over a detailed investigation of problems may be preferred by the client. While these propositions are developed from a theoretical consideration of Asian cultural values applied to counselling and are not empirically tested, Kim et al. (2001) nonetheless suggest a relevant set of variables to consider when studying counselling in an Asian cultural context such as Hong Kong.

First, the Chinese preference for an indirect and implicit style of communication, intended to maintain social harmony, may suggest a preference for the types of social and emotional support they find to be of value (Burleson & Mortenson, 2003). Second, Chinese people may be more reluctant to seek help for problems which involve revealing personal information to others since they may be concerned about disrupting family relationships and experiencing shame and loss of face (Kim, Ng, & Ahn, 2009). Third, Chinese people may see counsellors as authority figures. In Chinese, “counselling” is usually rendered as 輔導 and translated as “guidance,” which may be reflective of these characteristics. Chinese clients often refer to their counsellor as 老師, meaning teacher.

There is little literature on the relationship between Chinese culture and counselling, and the little research which has been conducted supports these suggestions. Studies conducted by Cao (2008), Kuo, Hsu and Lai (2011), Lin (2001) and Wei and Heppner (2005) have all concluded

that Chinese clients prefer a counsellor who provides information and gives suggestions, is oriented towards problem-solving and action-taking and who emphasises collectivism and social context. Research has also suggested that Chinese trained counsellors consider a more directive approach to be appropriate and helpful to clients, whereas counsellors trained in America prefer to adopt a more non-directive approach (Duan et al., 2015).

Ng and James's (2013) ethnographic study seeks to answer the research question, "How do Chinese clients experience psychotherapy?" (p. 3). The study concluded that the participants preferred a more directive style of counselling and favoured a counsellor who was "active, directive, and present-oriented" (p. 11) over a less directive and more insight-oriented approach. Participants also responded well to the counsellor addressing their "relational self" (p. 11) and not addressing only clients' feelings about themselves without considering their interdependent relationships. The study, therefore, supports the view that Confucianist values influence clients' preferred counselling approach. However, the participants were a small number of adult immigrants living in Canada, almost all from mainland China, and so the study's tentative findings may not be very transferrable to a population of Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong.

There is almost no research into the perspectives of school counsellors in Hong Kong. Chan (2005) found that teachers involved in school guidance endorsed a humanistic approach but the reasons for and implications of this finding have not been explored. In a study investigating school counselling in Hong Kong, Hue (2008) used a narrative methodology to collate guidance teachers' experiences of their school guidance roles, concluding that "Confucianism served as a paramount and respected reference for school guidance" (p. 306) and identifying four themes in

the guidance teachers' accounts. First, guidance teachers believed that their function was to "reveal the natural tendencies of students" (p. 307), meaning that they believed in their students' inherent goodness, and that it was their responsibility to foster these qualities and make them more evident. Second, the guidance teachers felt that they had a responsibility to assist students in handling personal problems, since benevolence (仁) is a key concept in Confucianism. This second theme was reported in a different study, also taking a narrative approach, where guidance teachers promoted resilience by drawing on the Confucian values of care and love (Hue, 2011). Third, the guidance teachers felt they should help students in becoming socially and morally "perfect men and women" (Hue, 2008, p. 310), embodying the etiquette, manners and social graces (禮) needed to be part of a harmonious society. Finally, the guidance teachers felt they had an important role in assisting students to develop harmonious relationships within their families. These four themes were derived from data collected from twelve relatively inexperienced and unqualified guidance teachers. As such, findings from the study may not be generalisable to the population of Hong Kong guidance teachers, although it sheds interesting light on the ways in which Confucianist values influence teachers' perceptions of their role as counsellors.

Studies into adolescent counselling in non-Asian contexts suggest that collaborative engagement is associated with significant positive therapeutic change (Karver, Handelsman, Fields, & Bickman, 2006), and young people report that such engagement with the counsellor is an important factor in their counselling (Binder, Moltu, Hummelsund, Sagen, & Holgersen, 2011; Everall & Paulson, 2002). Karver et al. (2006) have suggested that the success of collaborative engagement depends on a strong therapeutic alliance between the client and the counsellor,

meaning that a deep emotional connection should exist between the two. It may be the case, then, and for Chinese clients in particular, that the three Rogerian client conditions are necessary but not sufficient. In a study of teacher-counsellors' attitudes towards counselling, Chan (2005) concluded that teacher-counsellors working in Hong Kong preferred a humanistic style of counselling, though this does not mean that they advocated a Rogerian form of person-centred therapy.

One of the aims of the present study is to investigate the ways in which the sociocultural context may influence the experience of and processes taking place in SBC. Hence, with the above studies in mind, students attending schools in Hong Kong may respond best to a counselling style characterised by a relatively asymmetric relationship between counsellor and student, a more structured approach with a focus on problem-solving and the counsellor offering suggestions, and a tendency to engage with the student in the context of the wider community.

2.3.2 The influence of the school setting on counselling

An aim of the present study is to investigate the ways in which the school setting influences the experience of and processes taking place in SBC. There is little research into the ways in which the school setting influences counselling services and the way counselling is experienced by students although, from an ecological systems perspective, organisational features – such as whether counsellors are school staff or outside staff – may have an influence on an individual's experience. Research suggests that counselling can be equally effective when delivered in a

school setting as compared to a community setting such as a private practice. In meta-analyses, Baskin et al. (2010) and Reese, Prout, Zirkelback, and Anderson (2010) found effect sizes of 0.44 and 0.45 respectively for counselling conducted in schools in the UK.

A Scottish study into the relationship between school “structures and cultures” and the “promotion of positive mental health” (Spratt, Shucksmith, Philip, & Watson, 2006, p. 14) found that some models used by schools were more effective than others at using mental health service providers such as counsellors effectively. The study found that many schools adopt an “import” model (p. 18), where mental health professionals such as counsellors work on site but are isolated from other school staff members. Confidentiality rules and physical and temporal barriers led to mistrust and rivalry between teachers and counsellors, and teachers had a tendency to see counsellors as separate from the school and as a place to send students with problems to be “mended” (p. 19). Schools which adopted an “ownership” model (p. 18) tended to work more closely with counsellors, integrating them into the pastoral wellbeing structures, and this had a more positive effect on the school’s ability to address students’ mental health effectively (Spratt et al., 2006). The study also suggests that, when counsellors work closely with teachers, mental health provision is more effective. However, studies into SBC in the UK have reported that students value their counsellor’s independence (Griffiths, 2013).

2.4 The process of counselling with adolescents

Quantitative outcome research has established that counselling is an effective means of reducing the distress associated with a wide range of psychological problems experienced by adolescents. This is evidenced by several recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews of the literature. In a study of outcome data from 16,000 encounters between clients and counsellors and drawing on a wide range of outcome measures, Wolpert et al. (2012) found that counselling with adolescents led to outcomes which were significantly better than would be expected from no intervention. In a BACP review of 138 studies, McLaughlin et al. (2013) found that cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), psychodynamic therapy and humanistic therapy were all effective with adolescents. Reese et al. (2010) carried out a review “to assess if a file-drawer problem (i.e., studies conducted but not published that, as a whole, have different results than studies in the same area published) exists in the school-based outcome literature” (p. 1035). They reviewed 65 unpublished dissertation studies into the outcomes of school counselling and conducted a comparison of the results with published reviews. The median effect size for all counselling modalities was 0.44. Effect sizes were found to be smaller than those reported in published reviews. Fedewa et al. (2016) reviewed 109 studies “to investigate the efficacy of psychotherapy for children's mental health outcomes” (p. 59), concluding that psychotherapy is beneficial to young people compared to no intervention, and that no particular counselling modality is superior to any other. In a summary of the literature into therapy outcomes, Hanley and Noble (2017) conclude that counselling helps about 75% of young people.

Given the consensus of research into the effectiveness of counselling with adolescents, researchers have recently called for more emphasis to be placed on the processes taking place which contribute to effective counselling. In their discussion of therapeutic change in young people, Donald, Rickwood, and Carey (2014) have noted, for example, that “while psychotherapy works, how it works remains unknown” and that “little literature exists exploring the characteristics of therapeutic change in young people.” The authors go on to assert a “need to understand the processes that affect change in psychotherapy” (p. 313) and they reiterate Kazdin’s (2001) view that psychology has “no clear understanding of therapeutic change, no clear set of studies that advance our understanding of why treatment works, and scores of outcome studies that are at the same time wonderfully but also crassly empirical” (p. 59). Similarly, in a meta-analysis of studies into adolescent counselling, Fedewa et al. (2016) conclude that, although we know that counselling with adolescents is effective, less is known about “the interaction of complex factors that influence efficacy,” and the authors suggest that more research is needed into the processes and conditions which “contribute to treatment outcome” in school environments (p. 80).

The term “change process” is used in various ways in the literature. McLeod (2013) gives two helpful ways of thinking about the term. The first is broadly a sequence of phases or stages into which the counselling process can be broken down, such as: negotiating expectations, establishing a working alliance, and developing programmes for constructive change. The second definition offered by McLeod (2013) is “a very wide set of factors that may promote or inhibit therapeutic effects in clients” (p. 432), and he goes on to note that this definition differentiates between outcome and process. In this sense, the processes or helpful factors taking

place in counselling are like ingredients leading to the outcomes experienced by clients.

Processes in these two senses can be thought of as macro- and micro-processes, and McLeod (2013) compares the two by noting that “[a]nalyzing micro-processes is like looking at counselling through a microscope; examining the process of a whole treatment is like constructing a map by using a telescope to view the furthest horizons” (p. 434). Much research has been carried out into the various stages of a counselling relationship with adult clients, but little research has been conducted which investigates the stages through which clients pass as they experience counselling in a school setting. It is an aim of the present study to investigate these processes.

2.4.1 Macro-processes

Counselling is often presented as consisting of stages, and the present study seeks to investigate the broad stages or macro-processes through which students pass as they experience counselling. Egan (1994), for example, in his *problem management* model, divides counselling into three main stages: helping clients to identify and clarify problem situations; developing programmes for constructive change; and implementing goals. The main stages of the counselling process can be further divided into processes such as negotiating boundaries and expectations, forming a therapeutic alliance, helping the client to tell their story, negotiating the ending of the relationship and dealing with issues of loss (McLeod, 2013).

One recent example of research which investigates the stages through which an adolescent client undergoing counselling passes is a study conducted by Davis (2015) into the experiences of seven Welsh female students who had recently undergone SBC. In Davis's (2015) model, students experience initial uncertainty and then go on to develop a collaborative relationship where they feel safe and, through which, they ultimately experience positive outcomes. The author attempts to relate the processes in her model to features of person-centred therapy (PCT) and CBT. As such, the study develops some insight into the processes taking place in SBC and the ways in which these processes are related to a theoretical understanding of counselling. The study does not investigate the effects of client factors such as gender, age, sexual orientation and ethnicity which may have an impact on the processes taking place within counselling.

That different clients can experience the counselling process very differently has been illustrated by a study conducted by Gibson and Cartwright (2014). The authors develop four narratives of older adolescents (aged 16-18) who had undergone SBC in New Zealand. The narratives identified were: transformative, supportive, pragmatic and disappointed. The study concluded that young people make sense of the outcomes and purposes of counselling in very diverse ways, and the authors suggest that young people should not be regarded as a homogenous group for which counselling has the same meaning and impact. The key finding from Gibson and Cartwright's (2014) study seems to be that a number of different processes are taking place during SBC and different clients will experience different processes leading to a variety of outcomes, not all of which are positive.

2.4.2 Change processes

As is the case with the macro-processes discussed above, change processes, in the sense of McLeod's (2013) definition as "a very wide set of factors that may promote or inhibit therapeutic effects in clients" (p. 432) have been well researched with adult clients. The research conducted with adolescents, however, is more limited, and the present study seeks to investigate these processes in a Hong Kong school setting.

Reviews of qualitative studies into SBC have identified helpful factors such as: "talking to someone and being listened to," "getting things off one's chest" (Cooper, 2009, p. 144), "talking about emotions leading to relief," and "releasing tension" (Griffiths, 2013, p. 18). Griffiths (2013) identifies processes where clients "explore alternative ways of behaving," allowing them to "find answers for themselves" and "looking at ways to change" (p. 18).

In their study of eleven male students in Ireland aged 14 to 18, Dunne, Thompson, and Leitch (2000) identified several helpful processes which they categorised as affective (talking and sharing emotions; feeling understood) and cognitive (developing insight). They concluded that both affective and cognitive processes led to positive change, with insight and the exploration of feelings identified as being particularly helpful. The study illustrates that multiple change processes may be taking place within the counselling relationship and the authors suggest that the processes which students regard as helpful in their experience of SBC may depend on a number of factors, particularly the stage of cognitive development they have reached.

McArthur, Cooper, and Berdondini's (2016) UK study of 14 young people receiving school-based humanistic counselling (SBHC) focuses on "change processes" (p. 88) or "pathways to change" (p. 96) which the authors label "relief" (p. 92), "increasing self-worth" (p. 93), "developing insight" (p. 94), "enhancing coping strategies" (p. 95) and "improving relational skills" (p. 95). The study's conclusion suggests that multiple pathways for change in SBC exist and that not all students experience the same process. These processes are not mutually exclusive, however, and there is much overlap between them. The same positive changes were reached by clients in different ways, and the authors suggest that personality, age, gender and experience of school may play a part in the change processes which lead to positive outcomes in particular cases. The study looks only at one counselling modality (SBHC) and the authors recommend that more research is needed.

2.5 Common factors associated with positive counselling outcomes

Research has found that so-called common factors are present in all counselling approaches and make an important contribution to the effectiveness of counselling (Cooper, 2008). The most studied of these common factors is the relationship formed between the counsellor and the client. Factors associated specifically with the client or the counsellor, and factors related to parents, have also been investigated to a more limited extent (Hayes, 2017).

2.5.1 The counselling relationship

All approaches to counselling afford the relationship between the client and the counsellor a key role in the change processes taking place in counselling. Proctor (2014) distinguishes between *therapy relationship* and *therapeutic relationship* to highlight that the relationship need not necessarily be therapeutic although it might be a necessary pre-condition for change to take place. This study will use the term *counselling relationship* to communicate the sense that the relationship may or may not be therapeutic. The relationship between the counsellor and the client has different functions in different counselling modalities. In humanistic approaches, for example, the relationship is the means by which change occurs, whereas in CBT it is a precursor to the work of effective cognitive restructuring. Karver et al. (2006) estimate that “therapeutic relationship variables” (p. 51) have a medium effect size on outcomes in child counselling (Cohen’s $d = 0.54$). Of the variables Karver et al. (2006) identify, the most important is “therapeutic alliance” (p. 51). The concept of a therapeutic alliance between the client and the counsellor was developed by Bordin (1979) and is made up of three components: emotional bond, task collaboration and agreement on goals. Several meta-analyses have found a small to medium effect of therapeutic alliance on counselling outcomes (Karver et al., 2006; B. D. McLeod, 2011; Shirk, Karver, & Brown, 2011), that the contribution of therapeutic alliance to outcomes is the same for both behavioural and non-behavioural modalities, and that therapeutic alliance is a driver of therapeutic change (Labouliere, Reyes, Shirk, & Karver, 2017). A strong alliance is associated with a relationship in which the client sets the pace and goals of counselling, in which counselling is presented as a team approach and in which less structure is imposed by counsellors in the initial sessions (Jungbluth & Shirk, 2009).

Qualitative research suggests that a good relationship with the counsellor is at the heart of a positive experience of SBC, though it takes time to build. Initially, clients are often apprehensive about counselling and find it strange or unusual at first. Some report feeling afraid and insecure (Binder et al., 2011). These feelings are generally associated with the initial stages of counselling when clients are unsure about what to expect and whether they could trust the counsellor. A study conducted by Watsford, Rickwood, and Vanags (2013) concluded that adolescent clients generally do not know what to expect of counselling and, in a survey study, Watsford and Rickwood (2014) found no relationship between initial expectations and therapy outcomes, a finding which does not match with those of studies conducted with adults (Cooper, 2008). In a study conducted by Midgley et al. (2016), adolescent clients with depression in the UK found it hard to imagine what counselling would be like, though they expected it to involve some talking. Prior's (2012) narrative study focuses on the process of initial engagement of a student with counselling, and the study shows that broad counselling stages or phases are nuanced and consist of several different elements. Prior (2012) reports that being able to trust the counsellor is a key part of the process of engagement in counselling, and that this in turn depends on whether the client feels that the counsellor is accepting and non-judgemental and whether confidentiality can be ensured. Once trust is established, the student is more likely to speak candidly with the counsellor. The finding that establishing trust leads to being able to speak openly with a counsellor about problems is significant in that it relates two distinct elements of counselling together. The relationship which develops between the client and the counsellor has several qualities including feeling understood, being accepted, supported and respected. In developing their "supportive" narrative, Gibson and Cartwright (2014) described clients who "emphasised the counselling relationship as fundamental" (p. 519). Clients also describe the counsellor's

“welcoming attitude” and “sensitivity” (Binder et al., 2011, p. 560), and report that “being treated like an equal” (Prior, 2012, p. 238), not being judged (McArthur et al., 2016) and being understood and supported (Crocket et al., 2015) are important to them. Cooper (2009) found that clients reported “feeling empathised with by the therapist” and “feeling valued by the counsellor” (p. 145), and Griffiths (2013) also found that clients valued “feeling understood” (p. 18) and “feeling accepted and not judged” (p. 19) from the studies in her review.

Accounts given by clients, therefore, generally describe a safe and supportive relationship with the counsellor in which clients feel accepted, respected, valued and understood. This seems to be one of the key features of a positive experience of SBC.

2.5.2 Client factors

Research has shown that adolescent clients who come to counselling with a commitment to participate in counselling and motivation to change experience good outcomes (Karver et al., 2006; Watsford & Rickwood, 2014). Some studies have shown that, when adolescent clients see themselves as having a problem and want to change, they develop better alliances and show better outcomes (Fitzpatrick & Irannejad, 2008; Black & Chung, 2014). However, a study conducted by Killips, Cooper, Freire, and McGinnis (2012) found that a client’s motivation was not correlated with outcomes.

There is little research into the effects of gender and ethnicity on the outcomes of counselling adolescents, and the findings of such research are mixed. Studies suggest that white adolescents benefit more from counselling than those from other ethnic groups (Halliday-Boykins, Schoenwald, & Letourneau, 2005), though studies into the effect of ethnicity on counselling outcomes have mostly been conducted in the US and there is no research into the outcomes of SBC in a Chinese context.

2.5.3 Counsellor factors

Karver et al. (2006) found that counsellors' interpersonal skills such as empathy, warmth and genuineness were strongly correlated with outcomes (effect size, $d = 0.75$), and “therapist direct influence skills” (p. 53) such as active structuring of a session and giving guidance and instructions was even more strongly correlated with outcomes (effect size, $d = 0.87$). Counselling which takes into account a client's family and social context has also been found to be more effective than counselling which does not do this (Hogue, Liddle, Dauber, & Samuolis, 2004).

Qualitative research suggests that clients usually experience their counsellor as having a genuine and caring attitude (Binder et al., 2011). Some clients report liking the counsellor's professionalism and expertise in psychological matters, though others appreciated the counsellor downplaying any differences between counsellor and client (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). Counsellor self-disclosure has been reported as a positive feature of counselling by some clients. However, clear boundaries are also important, and non-intrusiveness, defined as “an attitude on

the therapist's part that combines a deep interest in the adolescent's inner world with calmness and a high degree of sensitivity to boundaries" appears to be a part of this (Binder et al., 2011, p. 561). The assurance of confidentiality is a positive feature of adolescents' experience of counselling. Confidentiality, the independence of the counsellor, and the counsellor's personal qualities were identified by Cooper (2009) and Griffiths (2013) in their reviews of SBC, where the counsellor is seen as caring, competent, flexible, professional and able to set up clear boundaries where appropriate self-disclosure can take place and counselling proceeds at the right pace. Both Cooper (2009) and Griffiths (2013) cited concerns about confidentiality as an issue which inhibited the counselling processes. Gibson and Cartwright (2013) found that some clients did not feel understood and that this was associated with the counsellor not being very engaged.

A small number of SBC clients report that specific behaviour or interventions on the part of the counsellor are unhelpful. Clients may feel that not enough direction and advice had been given (Lynass, Pykhtina, & Cooper, 2012), and that the advice given was unhelpful (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013) or that deeper engagement with the counsellor would be beneficial (Garmy, Berg, & Clausson, 2015). Homosexual clients in Hong Kong reported that their reasons for attending counselling were pathologised (Kwok, Winter, & Yuen, 2012). Cooper (2009) and Griffiths (2013) noted that clients wanted the counsellor to be more active in sessions and to give greater input.

2.5.4 Parental involvement

Karver et al. (2006) found that the alliance between parents and counsellors had a small effect ($d = 0.11$) on outcomes, and Kazdin, Holland, and Crowley (1997) and Zack, Castonguay, and Boswell (2007) found that a good relationship between counsellors and parents was associated with the continuation of therapy. There is some evidence that including parents in therapy sessions with their children has an effect on outcomes. Dowell and Ogles (2010) found an effect size of 0.27 of involving parents in therapy sessions, the effect being more apparent in non-CBT therapies. Karver et al. (2006) found that parents' willingness to participate in counselling was associated with good outcomes ($d = 0.65$), and Nock and Kazdin (2001) found that parents with either very high or very low expectations of counselling were less likely to drop out of counselling sessions. Parenting styles have been investigated and research suggests that counselling outcomes are not supported by parenting styles that involve guilt induction and withdrawal of privileges (Gorin, 1993) and that parents are less likely to be engaged with their child's counselling if they use harsh child rearing strategies (Kazdin et al., 1997).

The factors discussed above may influence the experience of adolescents in counselling, and the present study aims to explore the ways in which these factors may have such an influence.

2.6 Counselling modalities

Many different approaches to counselling have been developed and each has its own theoretical basis which posits the ways in which constructive change takes place and conceptualises constructive change in various ways (Hayes & Brunst, 2017). School counsellors typically draw on several different theoretical approaches to counselling, the most common of which are cognitive-behavioural, humanistic and psychodynamic approaches (Bondi, Forbat, Gallagher, Plows, & Prior, 2006; Cooper, 2009; Fox & Butler, 2009; Hill et al., 2011; Westergaard, 2013). Systems approaches, where the client's family and social context are taken into account during counselling, are also becoming more widespread (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). The theoretical basis of these orientations to counselling will now be considered and the research into the outcomes and change processes experienced by clients undergoing these types of counselling reviewed. Although the approaches postulate different mechanisms for therapeutic change to occur, it is common for counsellors to integrate the approaches, and change processes may take place which are consistent with more than one theoretical counselling orientation.

2.6.1 Cognitive-behavioural approaches

The premise of cognitive-behavioural approaches to counselling is that an individual's perception of their experience influences their emotional states. As such, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) posits that psychological distress arises from the individual's negative appraisal of events (Beck, 1976). Counselling, therefore, focuses on assisting clients to recognise such

inaccurate appraisals and develop more realistic thinking which will, in turn, alleviate symptoms of psychological distress. The counsellor facilitates guided discovery to enable the client to reflect on and identify cognitive distortions and replace them with more realistic thoughts. Other techniques are also widely used in CBT, including behavioural experiments, where clients test the outcomes of different behaviours in order to support or contradict beliefs, modelling behaviour by the counsellor, social skills training and psychoeducation (Kennerley, Kirk, & Westbrook, 2007). The idea that modification of cognitive content is responsible for positive therapeutic change has recently been challenged (Longmore & Worrell, 2007) by the so-called third-wave modalities such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and mindfulness-based approaches, where other mechanisms of change such as the development of psychological flexibility are proposed (Ciarrochi, Bilich, & Godsell, 2010).

A large amount of outcome research has been conducted into the effectiveness of CBT with adolescents. Wethington et al. (2008) reviewed several interventions for children exposed to traumatic events over 30 studies and concluded that there was strong evidence for the effectiveness of individual and group CBT. Harris and Pattison (2004) carried out a review for the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) to address the question: “is counselling effective with children and young people?” (p. 5). A total of 54 studies were included in the review and were categorised into 19 randomised control trials (RCT), 8 controlled before and after (CBA) studies, 20 simple before and after (SBA) studies and 7 qualitative studies. The review’s findings were that several counselling modalities are effective for a range of presenting issues. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) was found to be effective in treating conduct problems, anxiety, depression, pain, aggression, school refusal, substance

abuse and symptoms following sexual abuse. Harris and Pattison's (2004) review was updated in 2013 to include more recent research (McLaughlin et al., 2013). 114 studies met the inclusion criteria for the updated review, with a greater number of studies (36%) investigating CBT than any other type of counselling. The review found evidence that CBT is an effective type of counselling for addressing a wide range of issues, especially behaviour and conduct disorders, anxiety disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but evidence also showed that CBT is less effective for addressing depression. CBT is usually a short-term (less than 12 weeks) type of counselling, and there was little evidence to indicate that CBT is effective in the longer-term. Kelley, Bickman and Norwood (2010), in their comparison of meta-analyses of CBT and non-cognitive treatments, concluded that cognitive techniques were not superior to other approaches.

Studies into the efficacy of CBT generally report symptom reductions measured on quantitative scales, and so it is not possible to see the effect of CBT techniques separately from non-specific factors such as the therapeutic alliance between the counsellor and the client.

2.6.2 Humanistic approaches

The person-centred approach is premised on the view that individuals experience psychological distress when their *self-concept* – how they view themselves – is not congruent with their *experiencing self*. Individuals have the tendency to actualise or experience themselves more as they would ideally like to be, and will hence undergo healthy psychological growth, if they

experience an environment in which they are able to behave as their ideal self and not feel negatively evaluated. The counsellor's role, therefore, is to provide an environment amenable to such growth. Rogers (1957) identified the conditions which he theorised were necessary and sufficient for psychological growth to occur. Three of these conditions relate specifically to the counsellor and have sometimes been referred to as the core conditions or the counsellor conditions. First, the counsellor must be congruent, meaning open to and aware of his or her changing experience, in all interactions with the client. Second, the counsellor must empathise, meaning that he or she must try to understand the client's experience and communicate this experience to the client. Third, the counsellor must be accepting and non-judgemental of the client. At all times, the counsellor must adopt a non-expert stance in relation to the client, who is considered to be the expert in his or her own experience and, as such, will be able to identify what is needed for growth.

Cooper (2009) conducted a review of 30 studies of audit and evaluation of school counselling services in the UK, most of which provided humanistic counselling. Counselling was strongly correlated with significant improvements in mental health (effect size, $d = 0.81$). Approximately 50% of clients with significant levels of distress demonstrated clinical improvement, and 80% of respondents rated counselling as moderately or very helpful. On average, improvements brought about by counselling were largest in the areas of friendships (mean ES 0.47, SD 0.14) and home life (mean ES 0.41, SD 0.22), followed by improvements in classroom learning (mean ES 0.26, SD 0.24).

Harris and Pattison's (2004) review found evidence that humanistic therapies are effective in addressing anxiety, depression, reducing suicide risk and symptoms following sexual abuse, but not effective in addressing behavioural problems in adolescents. There was some evidence for the effectiveness of creative therapies such as art and music therapy in treating anxiety, behavioural problems, low self-esteem and symptoms following sexual abuse. McLaughlin et al.'s (2013) review also concurred that humanistic therapies were helpful for children and adolescents with depression, specifically when the presenting problems involved relational issues and conflict. Hölldampf, Behr, and Crawford (2010) reviewed 94 studies on person-centred and experiential (PCE) therapies with young people. The reviewers found evidence that PCE therapies are effective in the treatment of a wide range of issues including anxiety, adjustment problems, mood disorders, eating disorders, speech difficulties and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). PCE therapies were most effective in the treatment of anxiety.

Research into counselling with adolescents, such as a meta-analysis of over forty studies conducted by Karver et al. (2006), has suggested that a strong therapeutic alliance is a key predictor of positive outcomes. Interview studies have shown that features of the relationship such as authenticity and empathy are valued as part of the counselling experience by clients (Thompson, Bender, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007). Adolescents have reported a more positive experience of counselling when the counsellor is accepting, supportive and trustworthy (Everall & Paulson, 2002) and when 'emotional closeness' is a feature of the relationship (Binder et al., 2011). Studies into SBC have found that clients value talking and being listened to, feeling understood or supported and feeling that the therapist is comfortable with their role (Cooper, 2004; 2009; Dunne et al., 2000; Hill et al., 2011, Lynass et al., 2012), factors which are similar to

Rogers's (1957) core condition of empathy. Young people experiencing the counsellor as non-judgemental and having their individuality recognised may be similar to Rogers's (1957) condition of unconditional positive regard (Binder et al, 2011; Cooper, 2004; Crocket et al., 2015; Lynass et al., 2012; McKenzie, Murray, Prior, & Stark, 2011).

The qualitative literature is more descriptive than explanatory, and there is no SBC literature which explicitly attempts to relate the processes taking place in counselling to person-centred theory.

2.6.3 Psychodynamic approaches

Psychodynamic counselling originated in the work of Freud (1953) and posits that psychological problems arise as a result of unresolved painful past experiences, particularly from childhood, of which a client is not consciously aware. In the psychodynamic approach, these subconscious problems can be brought into the conscious mind and resolved with the expert guidance of a therapist, whose function is to enable the client to develop insights into the subconscious mind and to relate current experiences to unresolved issues from the past.

Research into psychodynamic counselling with young people is limited and findings are mixed. In a review of studies into the effectiveness of psychodynamic psychotherapy with children and adolescents, Midgley and Kennedy (2011) conclude that "there is increasing evidence to suggest the effectiveness of psychoanalytic psychotherapy for children and adolescents" (p. 232).

However, many of the studies included in the review do not have control groups and so it is unclear to what extent any improvement is attributable solely to the psychodynamic approach over factors which are not specific to the approach.

Harris and Pattison's (2004) review of counselling with young people found that psychodynamic therapies are effective in treating conduct problems, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following sexual abuse, but not effective in treating depression. McLaughlin et al.'s (2013) review found evidence that psychodynamic counselling is effective in addressing depression in adolescents and reported a small amount of evidence to support its longer-term effectiveness. Goodyer et al. (2017) found that psychoanalytic therapy produced similar maintenance of reduced depressive symptoms to CBT twelve months after treatment of adolescents with major depressive disorder. Techniques specific to psychodynamic counselling have not been widely researched. In a retrospective study, Midgley and Target (2005) found that former child clients valued transference interpretations, and Ulberg et al. (2013) found that a counsellor's countertransference feelings of confidence are associated with a strong therapeutic alliance.

2.6.4 Systems approaches

Systemic approaches to therapy locate the individual in the network of relationships between members of the community, such as peer group, school, family and community, and treats problems as features of the way the social system functions as a whole. In systems approaches to

counselling, the emphasis is placed on the social group as a unit and not on one individual, and counsellors are concerned with cultural, gender and transgenerational perspectives within the system (Corey, 2015). Social systems consist of networks of relationships, and the properties of the system, including problems which occur, are assumed to arise from these networks of relationships and the emotional responses of the different individuals in the system, which is greater than the sum of its parts. Although a child may be exhibiting symptoms of psychological distress, problems are not located in any one individual and need to be addressed at the systemic level. Systemic approaches to school counselling have become increasingly common in schools in the United States (Hinkle, 1993; Keys & Lockhart, 1999), and Lewis (1996) has suggested that a school counsellor cannot be effective without considering the family's influence on a student. Mullis and Edwards (2001) suggest that school counsellors need not engage in family therapy but should adopt a systems perspective when counselling individual students or when working with parents. Systems approaches may be particularly pertinent in Hong Kong, where family is such a central component of the structure of society (Stockman, 2013).

Much has been written on the importance and need for a systems approach to counselling in schools, and the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012) takes a systemic approach to the implementation of a comprehensive school counselling service. There is, however, little research into the effectiveness of particular systemic interventions. Nelson (2006) has suggested that family counselling, where parents are brought into school to engage in brief interventions, can be beneficial to students. In a randomised longitudinal study into the effects of a family competency training intervention in the US (Spoth, Randall, & Shin, 2008), parents and children were assigned to an intervention group or a minimal contact group. After seven sessions led by school

counsellors, children in the intervention group showed significantly higher levels of school engagement and lower levels of poor conduct.

2.6.5 Generic counselling techniques

While many techniques are associated with particular counselling orientations, several cannot claim to be located in any particular tradition and there is limited research into these non-specific techniques. Qualitative studies have consistently found that young people value advice given by their counsellor, though the advice needs to be in the form of suggestions and possibilities and not given as directives (Cooper, 2004; Griffiths, 2013). In adult counselling, setting goals has consistently been associated with good outcomes (Cooper, 2008) but, in counselling with young people, there is little evidence to show that goal setting is effective, and the situation is complicated by the conflicting goals with which young people and their parents enter counselling (Hawley & Weisz, 2003). Mindfulness practice with young people has been investigated, and research suggests that mindfulness training programmes can be effective at reducing anxiety and increasing academic performance, attention and self-control (Bögels, Hoogstad, van Dun, de Schutter, & Restifo, 2008; Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2010).

The change processes which take place in SBC in a Hong Kong school setting may be consistent with some of these approaches. Since the present study seeks to investigate the change processes experienced by students as they undergo counselling, it may be possible to relate these processes to the theoretical mechanisms effecting therapeutic change proposed by different modalities.

2.7 Clients' experiences of school-based counselling

It is an aim of the present study to investigate the experiences of adolescents as they undergo counselling, and this section presents a review of the qualitative literature in this area.

The complexity of counselling outcomes is exemplified by the so-called equivalency paradox, the widely recognised phenomenon that different counselling modalities lead to very similar levels of symptom reduction, as measured on quantitative scales, despite having very different approaches and philosophical underpinnings (Cooper, 2008; Stiles, Barkham, Mellor-Clark, & Connell, 2008). In a qualitative study into this phenomenon, Nilsson, Svensson, Sandell, and Clinton (2007) found that all the clients investigated had improved to a similar degree in terms of reported symptom reduction but, despite this, the clients reported significant differences in the ways they had experienced therapy and the ways they understood their improvement. For example, different types of learning had occurred over the course of therapy – CBT clients felt that they were better equipped with the ability to problem-solve, whereas clients undergoing psychodynamic therapy felt they had greater insight into themselves. Nilsson et al.'s (2007) paper, however, was conducted with adult clients. In a paper reporting the experiences of adolescents in counselling, Gibson and Cartwright (2014) observed a similar phenomenon, noting that the accounts of counselling outcomes reported by the research participants

did not seem to match very well with the standard ways in which 'outcomes' of counselling are reported by counselling professionals or researchers. Certainly, the idea that a good counselling experience would produce a linear process of

symptom improvement was not reflected in participants' accounts. This highlights a potential mismatch between medicalised understandings of outcomes in counselling and client experience (p. 522).

These findings suggest that qualitative studies in which clients are asked about their experiences of the counselling process may enable researchers to investigate the different ways in which the outcomes of counselling are experienced and conceptualised by clients, and also lead to a better understanding of the processes taking place in counselling. For Wilkins (2010), qualitative research has the potential to offer a deep and nuanced understanding of personal experience not available through quantitative methods. While recognising the importance of quantitative studies into counselling, McLeod (2013) suggests that “the rhetoric of randomised research trials (RCTs) excludes many important and interesting aspects of therapy” (p. 248) and hence calls for a greater emphasis on qualitative methods which seek to investigate in detail what is happening in counselling situations.

Policy and funding decisions in healthcare are highly influenced by quantitative, evidence-based research but, as McLeod (2013) notes, “there is a growing appreciation that effective service planning also needs to heed the voices of consumers and service users, and that qualitative research offers a means of representing these views” (p. 14). For some time, there has been a recognition that young people's perspectives are important in understanding how best to engage with them (Claveirole, 2004). Hanley and Noble (2017) note that “it is now established practice to place a high significance on the child's perspective,” and that the client's perspective in SBC

is not the same as that of a teacher or caregiver, and hence that “we cannot approximate their views from an adult close to them” (p. 70).

Researchers have, for these reasons, called for a more methodologically diverse research base. In their review of UK-based studies into the effectiveness of counselling for children and adolescents, McLaughlin et al. (2013) write that

[f]uture research needs to be rigorous and transparent, and capture the complexity of routine practice with this client group. To address this, a wider range of research methodologies is recommended (p. 6).

Donald et al. (2014) have also argued that “an independent stream of qualitative research into therapeutic change should be undertaken to explore young people’s experiences” (p. 313). More qualitative research into counselling has been carried out in recent years. Donald et al. (2014) note that

[t]he historically dominant quantitative paradigm of studying psychotherapy processes via outcome-based measures has begun to wane. In its place, qualitative methodologies have grown in popularity and are increasingly recognized as valuable tools to researchers interested in studying psychotherapy (p. 317).

Donald et al. (2014) go on to report, however, that the qualitative literature investigating counselling adolescents remains relatively sparse and fragmented.

In such literature, clients report several common benefits of counselling and research has investigated the ways in which they experience change processes leading to these outcomes.

Clients report that, after counselling, they feel more confident, have a greater sense of self-worth and can stand up for themselves more (McArthur et al., 2016). Increased confidence has several positive impacts on clients, including better relationships with peers and parents, greater participation in school classes and a greater sense of personal agency. This connection between increased confidence and improved tangible outcomes has been summarised by McArthur et al. (2016) as the client entering “a cycle of evolving self-esteem, self-efficacy, confidence and agency” (p. 93). Clients feel that they are better able to regulate their emotions after counselling and speak about being more emotionally aware, thinking before acting, being more in control of their behaviour and feeling less trapped by strong emotions. Another commonly reported outcome of counselling is managing negative emotions. Clients report better emotional regulation, being able to cope with negative emotions more effectively and experiencing catharsis or relief after counselling (Cooper, 2009; Griffiths, 2013).

Clients who have attended SBC report that counselling enables them to develop a wide range of strategies for dealing with personal and other problems, and this is often linked with the ability to regulate emotions more effectively and an increased self-awareness (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014). A reduction in poor conduct has been reported, and clients feel able to concentrate better

and communicate more effectively with teachers and other students. Rupani, Haughey, and Cooper (2012) conclude that “the biggest contribution counselling has made to the pupils’ academic achievements is by increasing their ability to concentrate” (p. 510). Attendance at school also improves for some clients and this, along with other areas of improvement such as better academic progress and a greater willingness to engage with school activities, appears to be linked to improved confidence (Crocket et al., 2015; Rupani et al., 2012; McArthur et al., 2016). Some clients speak about attending counselling as a resource that enables them to continue coming to school (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014). Both Cooper (2009) and Griffiths (2013) identify problem-solving as a common outcome of SBC, and the literature reports a wide range of ways in which clients have come to address problems in a new way.

Clients often report having better relationships as a result of having attended a course of SBC. Better relationships appear to be linked with several other underlying changes. Developing a new self-image is one such change (Crocket et al., 2015). Another change is an increased level of empathy (Garmy et al., 2015). Better listening skills is also cited as a reason for developing better relationships (McArthur et al., 2016). Developing a more positive perception of other people and noticing that others seem to have a more positive perception of the client are also reported.

Several clients report that they had been able to develop insight in various ways during SBC (Crocket et al., 2015; Dunne et al., 2000). This insight appears to be the ingredient which enabled some clients to make connections between thoughts, emotions and behaviour and hence to make positive changes: Garmy et al. (2015) have concluded that “the insight that thoughts,

emotions, and behavior are linked together enabled them to change their behavior to create less stressful conditions” (p. 4). Clients report feeling happier and more positive after their experience of counselling as a result of developing insight (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014; Lynass et al., 2012). In their reviews of SBC, Cooper (2009) and Griffiths (2013) identify the categories of “insight” and “insight and self-awareness” respectively. It is unclear whether clients view the various kinds of insight they experience as an outcome of counselling or as a feature of the counselling process itself.

Negative outcomes of counselling are reported much less frequently than positive outcomes. Gibson and Cartwright (2014) presented “disappointment” as a narrative theme which emerged from some clients’ experiences of SBC: “Participants who used this narrative structure emphasised the lack of impact that counselling had had on their lives and came away with the belief that a solution to their problems could not be provided by counselling” (p. 521). Lynass et al. (2012) noted that two participants reported “feeling that little had changed for them” but they also observed that “each of these participants did go on to discuss aspects of their life that had changed, as well as aspects about counselling that they found helpful” (p. 60), even though their experience of counselling had generally not been impactful. Griffiths (2013) identified a category called “no change/not helpful.” For a small number of clients, counselling appeared to cause stress and even exacerbate their problems (Binder et al., 2011; Gibson & Cartwright, 2014).

The present study aims to add to our understanding of adolescents’ experience of counselling and hence to contribute to the literature in this area.

2.8 Research into the perspective of school counsellors

The qualitative research reviewed above has been carried out from the perspective of the client. Counsellors and clients may differ in the way they conceptualise successful counselling, and may also differ in their perception of what is helpful within the counselling relationship (Hamilton-Roberts, 2012). The potential usefulness of research which seeks to report these perspectives has been noted in the literature (Baginsky, 2004). Despite this, there is very little research into the counsellor's perspective of what works in counselling adolescents.

Hamilton-Roberts (2012) conducted a focus-group interview with four school counsellors in the UK to investigate their perceptions of the impact of the counselling they provided on clients and of the attributes of the counselling service. The counsellors reported that their work had a significant positive impact on students' mental health and emotional wellbeing and, to a lesser extent, brought about an improvement in their learning and academic attainment. Counsellors also felt that their work had a positive impact on students' family life. The confidential nature of the service and its independence from the school were seen as its key positive attributes.

In Gilat and Rosenau's (2012) study, school counsellors in Israel were asked about their successful experiences. The counsellors reported that they felt most successful when they had been able to develop a good relationship with clients or to promote a change in a client's behaviour or emotional wellbeing. Although not directly related to client outcomes and processes, the study gives some insights into what counsellors regard as positive outcomes of their work with clients.

Westergaard (2013) conducted a narrative study in which five UK-based counsellors working in a voluntary agency attached to a school were asked the broad question “what works?” (p. 98) in their counselling practice. Four key themes were developed from the data. Safety, both in terms of the physical counselling space and the relationship developed, was key, as was the need for a trusting and respectful relationship. The counsellors also identified the importance of flexibility in their approach to counselling, drawing techniques from different orientations, and the use of creativity such as art in their work with clients. The study did not seek to compare the perspectives of the counsellors with those of the clients and so, as the author notes, “it could be argued that there is little evidence to support the link between what counsellors see as effective and what the clients experience” (p. 104). In a study which did compare adolescents’ and counsellors’ perceptions, Tatar (2001) investigated the reasons for self-referral of clients to a school counselling service in Israel. The assurance of confidentiality and a trusting relationship were considered to be the most important factor by both clients and counsellors, and this finding is consistent with that of Westergaard (2013).

The present study aims to add to the limited research into the perspectives of school counsellors and, by comparing this perspective with that of students, to gain insight into the processes taking place in SBC.

2.9 Research gaps

As the foregoing review illustrates, a large body of quantitative research shows that SBC is effective, but far less is known about the mechanisms by which counselling achieves positive outcomes for clients. Fedewa et al. (2016) summarise the situation well: “[w]e currently know that psychotherapy is generally quite effective with children and adolescents. What is less known is the interaction of complex factors that influence efficacy” (p. 80). Little qualitative research into the processes taking place in SBC has been carried out to date, despite the need to explore the complexities of counselling with this specific client group (McLaughlin et al., 2013). Fedewa et al. (2016) conclude that “[r]esearchers need to move beyond model comparison studies (i.e., which type of therapy works) to a more process-oriented approach (i.e., why does it work and with whom?)” (p. 78).

A small amount of research has begun to explore the stages through which clients move in counselling and the factors leading to positive therapeutic change. Tentative models have been proposed to account for positive outcomes, and there is some recognition that multiple processes may be experienced by clients. These experiences may be influenced by the cultural situation in which counselling is taking place, perhaps in profound ways which make the Chinese experience of counselling very different from the experience of clients in Anglo-American cultures, and this area is very much under-researched and extremely pertinent as counselling becomes more established and widely used in Hong Kong and China (Higgins et al., 2008). Little research has been carried out into school counselling in Hong Kong, despite this intervention potentially being of value. Indigenous counselling theories which are more sensitive and responsive to the

Chinese context are absent from the literature (Alvarez & Lee, 2012; Cheng & Tse, 2014; Lim, Lim, Michael, Cai, & Schock, 2010; Yuen et al., 2014). There is very little research into the counsellor's perspective of what constitutes successful outcomes and which processes lead to these outcomes, and research which attempts to capture the perspectives of both clients and counsellors in a single study is almost entirely absent from the literature.

2.10 Summary

Quantitative research into the outcomes of SBC in adolescents provides very strong evidence for its effectiveness as an intervention for addressing many presenting issues in school settings.

Despite the large body of quantitative research into the outcomes of SBC, however, little is understood about the processes taking place in counselling with adolescents (Donald et al., 2014; Fedewa et al., 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2013). No research to date has been carried out which explores the ways in which SBC is influenced by a Chinese sociocultural context.

A small number of qualitative studies have been carried out into the outcomes of SBC and the processes leading to positive change. This body of research also identifies respectively helpful and unhelpful features of counselling to adolescent clients. The qualitative research carried out to date has been almost entirely descriptive, and almost no attempt has been made to investigate the processes taking place in SBC. The very limited research in this area suggests that several processes contribute to positive outcomes. Little research has been carried out into SBC in Hong Kong, despite this intervention potentially being of value. The sociocultural context of the school

setting may significantly influence the students' experience of counselling, as may the relationship between counsellors and teachers and the close-knit nature of the school community. Research which investigates the ways in which counselling is helpful to secondary school students in local schools, the helpful features of such counselling and the processes taking place leading to positive outcomes could be of value to this population of young people.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Overview

This chapter begins with a description of critical realism and a justification for its application as a philosophical framework for the study. The way in which critical realism is operationalised to form a coherent methodology appropriate to address the research questions is discussed, and the use of thematic analysis as the key component of the methodology is presented in detail.

Characteristics of the study schools are described and the theoretical sampling method for selecting participants is discussed. Data collection and analysis procedures are presented in detail and ethical issues are considered. The validity of the study's findings is considered in terms of the study's credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability, and its theoretical and practical value and limitations. Finally, a reflexive commentary on the researcher's role in the project is given.

3.2 Philosophical orientation

3.2.1 The critical realist stance

Research methodology consists of a number of elements which must be mutually consistent, appropriate to address the objectives of the research and enable the research questions to be addressed in a meaningful way. The methods through which data are collected and analysed and

the ways used to communicate the findings of the research are the key elements of the methodology and should be developed and applied in the context of a relevant theoretical framework. The present study is conceived and carried out from a critical realist perspective, a stance which focuses on process, causation and context. The following section describes critical realism and the reasons for using it as a framework for this study.

Critical realism was developed by Bhaskar and others in the 1970s (Bhaskar, 1979, 2013) as an alternative to the then dominant alternative philosophies of positivism and constructivism, both of which, as Bhasker argued, reduce reality to human knowledge. Critical realism asserts that ontology (i.e. the nature of reality) cannot be reduced to epistemology (i.e. our knowledge of reality) and posits a stratified understanding of ontology consisting of three levels. The first is the *empirical* level, where events are experienced by groups and individuals and mediated through interpretation. This level of ontology is contingent on context and experienced and interpreted in different ways by different social groups or individuals. In a helpful analogy, Walsh and Evans (2014) liken this level of reality to the branches of a tree, as shown in Figure 3.1. The second, or *actual*, level of reality consists of reality in its entirety, much of which is unobserved but which regulates the empirical level. In Walsh and Evans's (2014) analogy, the *actual* level is described as a tree trunk obscured by a wall: the activity taking place in the trunk is regulating the branches but is mostly unobserved. The deepest level of reality is the *real* level, the causative mechanisms which exist and may or may not be activated in particular contexts. This level is represented by the roots of the tree.

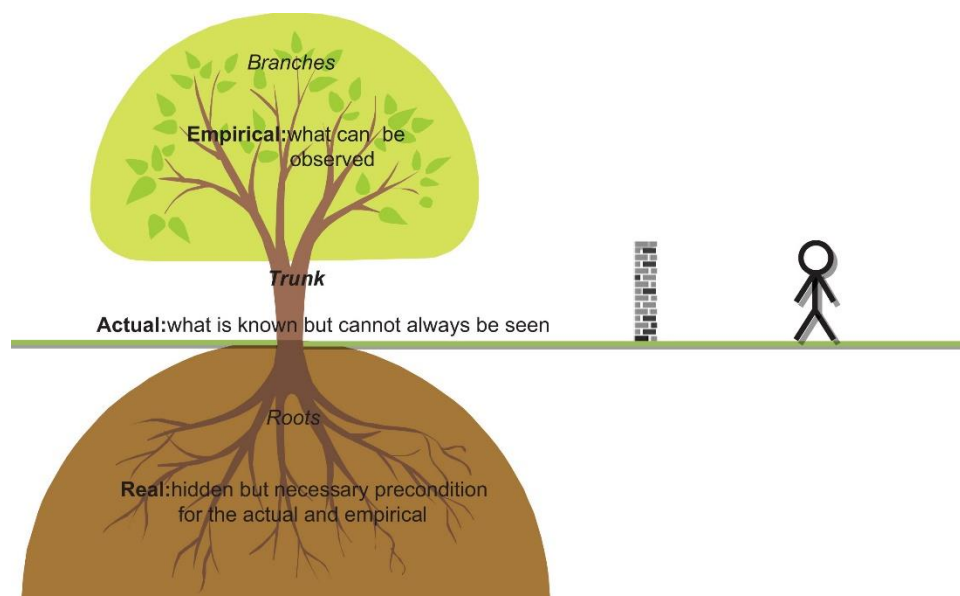


Figure 3.1. The three ontological levels in critical realism (Walsh & Evans, 2014, p. 2)

3.2.2 Causal mechanisms and the importance of context

One of the key objectives of critical realism is to explain observable events through reference to the causal mechanisms which exist in the real level of ontology and which may be activated by particular contexts. This focus on context and causation gives critical realism the potential to provide insights into phenomena which might otherwise be missed. Critical realism seeks to explain the outcomes of interventions in certain contexts, or “what works for whom in what circumstances” (Pawson, 2006, p. 25). Change processes in SBC have been studied, albeit to a limited extent, and causal pathways leading to change have been proposed. There has been scant attention to the context in which such change processes occur, however. Critical realism provides a framework to study change processes in a new context and, specifically, to investigate the ways

in which the context influences the change processes taking place. The study's theoretical framework draws on theories of change in counselling and a socioecological context to propose an explanation of the ways in which the sociocultural and school setting of SBC influences students' experience of counselling. The phenomena under investigation – the ways in which SBC is experienced and the change processes taking place in SBC – are set in a specific context, and the two cannot be separated, with the latter influencing the former.

In critical realism, observable events are never fully explainable, but the so-called generative mechanisms which exist at the real level are seen as tendencies or causative agents. Bhaskar (2013) sees observable phenomena as being rooted in and influenced by deeper structures in the real level of ontology and calls this process *emergence*. Just as importantly, the causative mechanisms operating at deeper levels of reality to influence observable phenomena are highly dependent on context. The present study has an ideographic perspective, being concerned with particular experiences of counselling in a specific context, over a more general, nomothetic, perspective. Since critical realism asserts that phenomena can never be fully explained, complete generalisation is not possible. Willig (2008) distinguishes between intrinsic and instrumental studies: in the former, the researcher seeks to understand the situation in its own right, whereas the latter constitute specific examples of a more general phenomenon. This is not to say that the findings of a study such as this cannot be useful in a more general sense, however. The objective of the research is not to produce generalisations but is instrumental in the sense that counselling is being studied in a context of particular interest which may give insights which are more widely applicable.

3.2.3 The perspective of the participants and the researcher

Critical realism emphasises that experiences are always mediated through human interpretation, acknowledging that “there can be more than one scientifically correct way of understanding reality in terms of conceptual schemes” (Lakoff, 1987, p. 265) and also highlighting the role of the researcher in the interpretation of data. Critical realism asserts that “our knowledge of the real world is inevitably interpretive and provisional rather than straightforwardly representational” (Frazer & Lacey, 1994, p. 182), which is to say that we can have different perspectives on the same reality.

The research methodology adopted in the study is predicated on the view that it is possible to access private psychological events such as thoughts and emotions through the analysis of participant accounts of their experiences. Critical realism assumes that the system under investigation has “an existence that is independent of the researcher’s view or interpretation” (Willig, 2008, p. 87), while recognising that the experiences of all phenomena are interpreted: the researcher is not a neutral, objective observer. As an inherent part of the nature of reality, the researcher’s subjectivity should be seen as a resource and not a “problem to be managed” (Clarke & Braun, 2018, p. 107), and making use of researcher subjectivity appropriately and creatively are important considerations in designing the methodology. Specifically, the objective of a critical realist approach is to use the process of retroduction (discussed in Section 3.2.5) to make inferences about the processes taking place at the real level of ontology from the subjective reports of participants at the experiential level. This inferential reasoning process is a creative endeavour and may involve the researcher needing to “elaborate upon (or deviate from)

participants' own interpretations in order to 'provide fuller or more adequate interpretations' of reality" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 190).

The study seeks to produce a detailed and nuanced account of change processes in a particular context. Triangulation between multiple perspectives is a key focus of the study, and conclusions about causal mechanisms operating at the real level of ontology are drawn by triangulating across the reported experiences of both students undergoing counselling and the counsellors and then drawing inferences about the causal mechanisms operating at the real level of ontology. These two groups of participants may have different perspectives of the processes taking place within counselling and how counselling might be effective. Taking both perspectives into account may yield insights which would not be otherwise available.

3.2.4 Axiology of critical realism

Axiology refers to the values inherent in a particular approach to research (Creswell, 2013). Bhaskar's work in developing critical realism focused on effecting change and bringing about improved conditions (Williams, Rycroft-Malone, & Burton, 2017). Walsh and Evans (2014) note that "Bhaskar's conception of critical realism sought to enhance human freedom and flourishing, aligning it explicitly with this value base" (p. 4), and it is this emphasis which makes critical realism potentially so powerful as a framework for effecting change. One of the study's objectives is to provide actionable recommendations for change in counselling practice in Hong Kong schools, and the focus critical realism places on context makes it sensitive to the

mechanisms which may be effective in the particular cultural and organisational context being studied. Since the present study investigates counselling in the context of schools in Hong Kong, critical realism has the potential to allow helpful recommendations to be made to school counsellors, administrators and other change agents.

3.2.5 Operationalising critical realism

Maxwell (2012) argues for the central place of critical realism as a paradigm in qualitative research, claiming that it has “achieved widespread, if often implicit, acceptance as an alternative both to naïve realism and to radical constructivist views that deny the existence of any reality apart from our constructions” (p. 5). Barth (1987) writes that, “[l]ike most of us, I assume that there is a real world out there – but that our representations of that world are constructions” (p. 87), and Maxwell (2012) notes that critical realism has been described as a “common sense basis for social research” (p. 5). This said, however, rather little attempt has been made to develop critical realism methodologically in a way that can be usefully applied in empirical research (Fletcher, 2017), perhaps as a result of critical realism’s methodological versatility and applicability in a wide range of contexts. Although critical realism is not associated with a particular set of methods, however, it does generally involve several key elements (Fletcher, 2017). These elements are: the role of theory, the search for *demi-regularities*, and the *abduction* and *retroduction* of data. This section describes these key methodological elements. Subsequent sections show how critical realism has been operationalised in this study based on the key elements in a way which can be applied to the research problem to bring about insights into SBC,

taking into account the context in which it occurs, and leading to recommendations for changes in counselling practice in Hong Kong schools.

The role of theory in the application of critical realism to the present study is particularly important. Theory is an important element in the research design since it directs the researcher's attention to what is to be investigated in the context of the study and hence enables meaningful questions to be asked. The research questions developed in a critical realism framework are guided by existing theory and, according to Bhaskar (2013), research questions can be tested empirically though not necessarily quantitatively, and researchers must recognise the ways in which theory depends on context. The present study seeks to test previous research in a new context and extend its scope. Marchal, Dedzo, and Kegels (2010) note that realist research starts out with a “mid-range theory” (MRT) by which they mean “how the intervention leads to which effect in which conditions” (p. 3) – essentially a hypothesis which takes into account context – and that the MRT is modified as a result of the findings.

At the core of critical realism is a search for demi-regularities, i.e. patterns or behaviours which are frequently observed in human behaviour. These patterns are the key elements in any data analysis using a critical realism framework and can be identified using qualitative data coding approaches (Fletcher, 2017). This is the principal way in which the critical realism framework has been operationalised. Following the identification of demi-regularities, critical realism attempts the abduction or *re-description* of the empirical data using theoretical concepts. In the process of abduction, the analysis of data is raised to a more abstract level. It is important to bear in mind that any theory developed in the process of abduction is dependent on context and is

provisional. Hence, any proposed theory is fallible. Finally, the critical realist approach to research uses retroduction, the search for causal mechanisms which explain the demi-regularities observed in empirical data. This relies heavily on the context in which the demi-regularities occur. The goal of retroduction is the identification of contextual conditions for particular causal mechanisms to operate and bring about the observed phenomena (Olsen, 2004). These mechanisms “could be physical, social or psychological, and may well not be directly observable except in terms of its effects” (Mingers, 2000, p. 1262). In retroduction, there is a continual movement between the different levels of ontology as the researcher engages in a process of inferential reasoning in order to more thoroughly understand and explain the phenomena being studied through the reports of participants.

Ultimately, the aim of critical realism is to support, modify or reject existing theories in order to provide the best possible explanation of what is happening and, as a result of this, to propose policy recommendations for effecting helpful change and improving the experience of participants. Theories developed through a critical realist approach are always provisional and open to modification by subsequent research. The present study takes the limited process research into SBC available as a starting point, develops a mid-range theory from it, and seeks to come to new insights by extending extant research to a new context. Specifically, the current project seeks to investigate the similarities and differences in SBC between contexts examined in previous research and the context of the Hong Kong schools under investigation.

3.3 Developing a mid-range theory

As noted above, realist research begins with a mid-range theory, described by Marchal, et al. (2010) as “how the intervention leads to which effect in which conditions” (p. 3). The MRT is essentially a working hypothesis which takes into account context and which is modified on the basis of subsequent data collection and analysis in order to give deeper insights into the mechanisms taking place which account for the experiences of individuals. An MRT can be formulated based on existing theory and also past experience.

The following MRT was developed from the literature review by considering how various findings from previous research may be influenced by the school setting and the sociocultural context. For example, previous findings have indicated initial reluctance to attend counselling since they find it strange or unusual at first. Lavik, Veseth, Frøysa, Binder, and Moltu (2018) have described this as “facing a scary situation.” Clients report feeling afraid and insecure (Binder et al., 2011) and don’t know what to expect (Watsford et al., 2013). In a Hong Kong Chinese context, students contemplating counselling may experience a heightened sense of fear and uncertainty since they see counsellors as authority figures due to the hierarchical nature of typical adult-child relationships, and they may also be reluctant to seek help if they feel they have to reveal information of a personal nature to others since they have been socialised into the belief that such sharing is inappropriate and even shameful (Ow & Katz, 1999). The MRT is as follows:

Students experience a common set of macro-processes as they engage with counselling. They experience initial uncertainty about approaching a counsellor and, over time, develop a trusting relationship. In the context of this relationship they feel safe to disclose more personal content and start to experience positive change. This set of macro-processes is influenced by both the Chinese sociocultural context and the way counselling is organised by the school. Specifically, students are resistant to counselling since they may see the counsellor as an authority figure, they are reluctant to disclose personal information to someone outside their family, and they may experience shame and loss of face as they engage in counselling. The school setting, which constitutes a close community, may also present a barrier to students attending counselling due to concerns about confidentiality.

Students experience several different processes leading to positive change within the counselling relationship. Processes which focus on improving relationships, particularly within the family, and on practical problem-solving, are more significant since these are areas suggested by the literature to be of particular importance for Chinese clients.

A strong emotional connection with the counsellor is a precursor to positive change. Students find several qualities of the counsellor essential to their experience of change: a welcoming and non-judgemental attitude, a sense that the counsellor cares about them personally, trustworthiness, sensitivity and perceived independence from the school. The development of trust between the student and the counsellor is

particularly important in the Chinese context. The genuineness of the counsellor is important to the students' experience of change, and a limited amount of self-disclosure on the part of the counsellor, while maintaining proper boundaries, is an exemplification of this. Insofar as these qualities are not present, change does not take place so readily or at all.

Students find several factors to be helpful in their experience of counselling, which at the same time are conditioned by cultural factors. For example, the culturally-induced perception of the counsellor-client relationship as asymmetrical may lead to students preferring a more directive style of counselling. Students value having someone to talk to and feeling listened to, being treated as an equal and being given the opportunity to find solutions to problems for themselves. They appreciate a focus on problem-solving and collaborative engagement. Practical advice and guidance is also valued, and students find it helpful when the counsellor focuses on the student's social context.

Students undergoing counselling experience a variety of positive outcomes: increased confidence and self-efficacy; an increased sense of self-worth; an increased ability to cope with negative experiences and emotions; better relationships with peers and family members; and developing insight into their psychological processes.

Certain cultural factors, and factors relating to the school setting, limit what can be achieved in counselling. Students may see counsellors as authority figures,

particularly if counsellors are school staff members, and this perception may limit how comfortable they can feel in counselling sessions. The close-knit nature of a school community also engenders ongoing confidentiality concerns. There is, therefore, be a limit to what students are willing to reveal to their counsellors and they continue to find it difficult to open up to someone outside the family.

3.4 Thematic analysis

Qualitative data coding is key in the search for demi-regularities (Fletcher, 2017), and various approaches to coding and making sense of qualitative data exist. Thematic analysis is a flexible method which can be adapted to different contexts and for different purposes, the focus on theme development being particularly appropriate in the search for demi-regularities which forms the basis of analysis using a critical realist approach. Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield (2015) have noted that thematic analysis “has become a widely used and recognised method in psychology and the social and health sciences” (p. 222). Thematic analysis allows the analysis of data from any number of participants to be carried out through the development of themes across all the data collected in the study and which can provide a rich, detailed and complex account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In their influential paper advocating for the importance and usefulness of thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) begin by describing the method as a very common but “poorly demarcated and rarely-acknowledged” (p. 4) approach to qualitative data analysis. In addition,

Clarke and Braun (2018) have noted that thematic analysis has sometimes been used without the development of a proper theoretical paradigm within which to conduct research and go on to say that this theoretical paradigm must be made explicit where thematic analysis is used as a method. Hence, it was important to develop a clear method for data analysis which was consistent with the critical realist paradigm, and this section considers the suitability of thematic analysis for data analysis.

In his discussion of research paradigms, Ponterotto (2005) considers features such as ontology, epistemology, axiology and method to locate a particular research method within a philosophical paradigm. He notes that his analysis “highlights the complexity of locating a particular qualitative approach in one specific paradigm” (p. 133) and concludes that thematic analysis generally “falls between the post positivism and constructivist paradigms, leaning toward the post-positivist end” (p. 133). This said, Ponterotto (2005) acknowledges that research using thematic analysis as a methodological approach can lie along the post positivist – constructionist continuum, and Clarke et al. (2015) have noted that thematic analysis is a method, not a methodology, in the sense that it is orthogonal to philosophical orientation and can be adopted within a realist/essentialist, critical realist/contextualist or relativist/constructionist context. Given this flexibility, thematic analysis is philosophically consistent with the critical realist perspective adopted in the study. The following section explains the ways in which the critical realist paradigm was operationalised in the study by making use of thematic analysis.

First, thematic analysis was used to search for demi-regularities across the entire data set, and so it was important that the data were as comprehensive and rich as possible. Data collection took

place by means of semi-structured interviews which were informed by the existing literature and conducted by one researcher (the author) in order to achieve a greater consistency of approach. The interviews with individual participants differed considerably from one another as different participants spoke about their own particular experiences, and the participants were encouraged to speak about any aspect of their counselling experience in any way they wished. Also, the interview schedule evolved somewhat as the study progressed to take into account themes which were being developed from the ongoing data analysis. Parallel data collection and analysis, and a synergy between the two where the latter informs the development of the former, is an important part of qualitative research and allows the collection of rich and comprehensive data. Hence, theoretical sampling was undertaken, whereby concurrent data collection and analysis enabled the developing themes to inform the choice of participants and subsequent interviews. Data collection took place until no new themes could be developed. After initial coding, theme development progressed at a level of greater abstraction and interpretation in the search for demi-regularities. This process of theme development continued until themes were produced which captured all the data.

Second, thematic analysis was used in a way which took pre-existing theory into account in informing the analysis. Data were analysed inductively or ‘bottom up’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to link the themes as closely as possible to the data. Fletcher (2017) notes that critical realism is not consistent with a completely inductive, data-driven approach to coding since existing theory is an important component of critical realist analysis, which “is always shaped by a researcher’s theoretical assumptions, disciplinary knowledge, research training, prior research experiences and personal and political standpoints” (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 225). Hence, the

present study used existing theory to develop a testable hypotheses in the form of a mid-range theory, and to sensitise the researcher to the data. Unlike a grounded-theory approach, where contact with existing theory is actively avoided until data analysis has been undertaken, the data were approached through the lens of prior research relating to change processes in counselling and the socioecological context. However, it was important not to be confined by prior theory since one of the key purposes of a critical realist approach is to develop new theory in the light of new data. Hence, no *a priori* coding scheme was used: categories were developed at a semantic level from the data as they were collected and were kept as close to the semantic content as possible, many of the codes being *in vivo* in order to keep the codes closely linked to the data.

Third, the methodology recognised the role of the researcher in interpreting meaning. In their approach to thematic analysis, Clarke and Braun (2018) regard themes as “active creations” of the researcher which “capture implicit meaning beneath the data surface” (p. 108). As such, thematic analysis seeks to capture underlying patterns (demi-regularities) in the data which may not be immediately apparent by a process of active researcher engagement with it. Clarke and Braun (2018) emphasise the importance of the reflexivity of the researcher, and regard researcher subjectivity as “a resource rather than a problem to be managed” (p. 107). The researcher’s perspective is an important component of the data analysis and the themes which are developed from the data will reflect this active role: the researcher is not simply giving voice to the participants. In a critical realist approach, the process of retrodution, whereby inferences about the causative mechanisms operating at the real level of ontology and accounting for the experiences of participants, requires an active and creative role on the part of the researcher. The methodology adopted in the study, therefore, did not make use of concepts such as coder-

reliability or accuracy. Code-books and other structured coding procedures such as coding schemes, and measures of inter-coder reliability or coding accuracy were not used. In order to be as explicit as possible about the role of the researcher, steps were taken to fully acknowledge the researcher's values and perspectives, and reflexivity was an important part of both data analysis and the presentation of findings.

Fourth, and related to the previous point, Braun and Clarke (2006) contend that thematic analysis has the potential to generate unanticipated insights, and that it can be useful for developing work suited to informing the development of policy. One of the aims of the study and of the critical realist approach generally is that the modification of existing theory should lead to the best possible account of what is happening given the context of the phenomenon being studied, and hence enable the proposal of policy recommendations for effecting helpful change.

Fifth, it was important that the methodology be able to take into account the context in which change processes took place since this is a key feature of critical realism. Clarke and Braun (2018) note that thematic analysis recognises “the situated and contextual nature of meaning” (p. 107). The study does not seek to produce statistically generalisable findings in the way a quantitative study may attempt to do. The phenomenon of change processes is located in a specific context, and Shenton (2004) notes that, “[s]ince the findings of a qualitative project are specific to a small number of particular environments and individuals, it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations” (p. 69). Generalisability does not need to be statistical, however, and a qualitative study can allow theoretical generalisations to be made. Shenton (2004) notes that, in order for judgements

about transferability to be made, a study should report the context of the research in some detail, including the following information: the location and number of participating organisations; inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants; the number of participants contributing data; the data collection methods used; the number and length of the data collection sessions; and the time over which the data were collected. The following sections give this information in detail.

Finally, the research findings were presented in a narrative form and illustrated by quotations from the participants and, in this sense, gives them extensive voice. The analysis attempted not to simply describe the data by grouping codes into themes but to be interpretive. Clarke and Braun (2018) have noted that themes are developed in thematic analysis at an abstract level in order to capture the “essence” or “core concept” of the data and do not simply act as “domain summaries” (p. 108). There was no attempt to assign frequency labels or to tabulate results numerically, but a consideration of the practical and theoretical significance of themes was an important part of the analysis: codes were developed by reference to the literature and also to what seemed to be important to the participants.

The foregoing discussion illustrates the suitability of the thematic analysis method within the critical realist philosophical framework for addressing the research aims. The methodology takes a strong ontological position but also acknowledges the role of the researcher in interpreting data and assigning meaning to the study’s findings. Clarke et al. (2015) refer to this approach as a “big Q” methodology and describe it as an “organic approach to coding and theme development, one that is informed by the unique standpoint of the researcher, and that is fluid, flexible and responsive to the researcher’s evolving engagement with the data” (p. 223).

Several other methodologies were considered for the study. Grounded theory method (GTM), initially developed by Glasser and Strauss (1967) and modified by others such as Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Charmez (2006), seeks to develop a theory of the phenomenon under study which is grounded in the data. Fletcher (2017) notes that GTM is generally not compatible with a critical realist paradigm since it avoids contact with existing theory and literature before and during data analysis, whereas critical realism uses theory to formulate research questions which can then inform the modification of existing theory as a result of context. Fletcher (2017) also notes that data analysis in critical realist research is not completely inductive but is informed – at least to some extent – by existing theory. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) is located in a phenomenological epistemology and seeks to understand an individual's experience in great detail. As such, IPA was not adopted since the aim of the study was to develop a more explanatory account of counselling with a focus on causative mechanisms in change processes.

3.5 Methods

3.5.1 Research locations

The present study's aim was to investigate the experiences of Hong Kong Chinese students receiving counselling in a school setting. Twelve schools with mostly local Hong Kong Chinese student populations were approached based on the researcher's knowledge of schools in Hong

Kong and professional network of principals and school counsellors, and three agreed to participate in the research project. It was desirable to collect data across more than one school to capture a range of experiences of counselling in different school settings, and a sample of three schools was judged to be sufficient to allow the collection of rich and diverse data. The populations of students at each of the schools were demographically very similar and collecting data from three sites enabled the collection of a larger data set from a reasonably homogeneous population. All three of the data collection sites were coeducational fee-paying secondary schools with student populations of around 1,000. Two of the schools (Schools 1 and 2) were private independent schools (PIS) and one (School 3) was part of the direct subsidy scheme (DSS). Schools 1 and 2 used English as the medium of instruction for all grade levels and subjects; school 3 had an English medium stream, and Forms 1 to 3 used exclusively English as the medium of instruction. The great majority of students at all three schools were Hong Kong Chinese and from middle socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. None of the schools had a significant population of Caucasian or ethnic minority students. The three schools each had a counselling service provided by on-site staff. The schools employed a total of ten counsellors and two counselling interns.

3.5.2 Participants and sampling

Although several studies have been conducted which seek to investigate the views of SBC clients, and a small number have attempted to investigate the perspectives of school counsellors, no studies have taken into account the perspectives of *both* clients and counsellors. The present

study sought to do this and hence to develop a richer account of the counselling experience.

Inclusion criteria for participants were that they should be local Hong Kong adolescents, between ages 14 and 19, attending schools in Hong Kong in which a counselling service exists and who had undergone around at least six sessions of counselling with one of the school counsellors within the last six months. Participants were required to have a native or fluent ability in spoken English in order to give good quality interviews. Counsellor participants were qualified counsellors trained to at least the Certificate level at either a local or overseas university or qualified social workers trained locally to the Master's level with additional relevant training and experience in counselling in school settings.

The number of participants needed for the collection of sufficient data in a qualitative study depends on the point at which theoretical saturation is reached (Mason, 2010). In their review of qualitative research, Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) have carried out a statistical analysis of data saturation across a large number of studies and concluded that around 20 to 30 participants generally enables data saturation in studies which identify themselves as being based on grounded theory and which, therefore, use coding of collected data. Clarke et al. (2015) suggest 9-15 as a minimum sample size for a thematic analysis in a professional doctoral project. These ranges were borne in mind throughout the process of data collection and analysis. Theoretical sampling was carried out until no new codes emerged and, at this point, saturation was assumed to have been reached. Mason (2010) notes that “[n]ew data (especially if theoretically sampled) will always add something new, but there are diminishing returns, and the cut-off between adding to emerging findings and not adding, might be considered inevitably

arbitrary” (para. 59). The point at which data collection ended was, therefore, something of a ‘judgement call’ made in collaboration with the project’s supervisors.

Twenty-five students were recruited from the three participating schools. Several methods for recruiting participants were considered, such as asking teachers or administrators to recommend student participants or sending emails to all students asking for participants. However, given that participants were required to meet several inclusion criteria, school counsellors were thought to be best placed to recruit participants, and so individual students were approached by the school counsellors and asked if they were willing to participate. All participants were ethnically Chinese and identified themselves as being indigenous to Hong Kong. The participants’ mean age at the time of interview was 16.7 years (SD 1.0 years) and their ages were in the range of 14.4 to 19.6 years. Sixteen participants were girls and nine were boys. Thirteen participants came from School 1, six came from School 2 and six from School 3. It was not possible to determine accurately the number of counselling sessions the students had undertaken for two reasons: first, a complete record of sessions attended was not available; second, some of the sessions were casual ‘drop-ins’ and not formally arranged sessions.

However, participants reported having attended counselling sessions for between two months and three years with a frequency of sessions ranging from biweekly to once every two months. For the purposes of reporting findings, the students have been assigned letters of the alphabet to protect their anonymity and they are listed in the order they were interviewed. Details of the student participants are given in Table 3.1.

Student	Gender	School	Counsellor	Age at interview	Presenting issue ²
A	F	1	D	16.7	Poor family relationships
B	F	1	D	16.0	Skipping class
C	F	1	E	17.4	Change in personal circumstances
D	M	1	E	16.8	Dealing with family illness
E	F	1	E	15.9	Stress
F	M	1	E	19.6	Academic stress, romantic relationship
G	M	1	E	18.0	Academic stress, poor family relationships
H	F	1	G	17.9	Struggling with school work, social problems
I	F	2	C	14.4	Bullying
J	M	2	B	17.3	Transition to new school
K	M	2	F	16.6	Poor attendance at school
L	F	2	B	15.9	Self-harming behaviour
M	F	1	G	15.1	Social problems at school
N	M	1	C	17.2	Low self-esteem, lack of confidence
O	F	1	D	17.2	Seeking someone to talk to
P	F	1	D	16.9	Poor family relationships
Q	F	1	D	16.0	Dealing with negative emotions
R	F	3	H	17.5	Relationship problems
S	F	3	H	17.3	Adjustment to new school, friendship problems
T	F	3	H	16.3	Anxiety about school work
U	M	3	H	16.2	Relationship problem
V	F	3	H	16.5	Relationship problem, academic stress
W	M	3	H	16.6	Academic stress, loneliness
X	M	2	F	16.1	Poor family relationships
Y	F	2	A	17.4	Transition to new school

Table 3.1. Students participating in the study

Students were asked why they attended counselling and gave responses which fell broadly into two groups. First, students were experiencing relationship problems, many of which were related to their family, describing “poor family relationships,” “relationship problems,” and “social

² Reported by the student him/herself

problems at school,” for example; second, students were experiencing stress related to the demands of their academic work which they described in various ways, such as “academic stress” and “anxiety about school work.” A few students reported other reasons for attending counselling such as adjusting to a new school, low self-esteem or being lonely. The self-reported presenting issues are given as contextual information: the study did not seek to take these issues into account in the data analysis.

Eight counsellors from the three participating schools were interviewed. Four came from School 1, three from School 2 and one from School 3. Five of the counsellors had other duties as part of their job description in addition to their counselling role. Six worked full time at their school, one was employed for three days per week and one for four days per week. Five of the counsellors were ethnically Chinese, four of whom spoke Cantonese as a first language and one of whom spoke Mandarin; three were British Caucasian native English speakers. Six were female and two were male. The mean number of years of service at the school was 7.0 years (SD 7.0 years) and their total length of service ranged from 1 year to 21 years. Four counsellors held a master’s degree in counselling and three held a master’s degree in social work. One held a certificate in counselling. The three social workers had all received training in counselling and had significant experience in counselling in school settings. Details of the counsellor participants are given in Table 3.2.

Counsellor	School	Gender	Qualification	Years of service at the school
A	2	F	Certificate in Counselling	4
B	2	F	Master's in Counselling	21
C	1	F	Master's in Counselling	4
D	1	F	Master's in Counselling	6
E	1	M	Master's in Social work	2
F	2	M	Master's in Social work	11
G	1	F	Master's in Counselling	1
H	3	F	Master's in Social work	2

Table 3.2. Counsellors participating in the study

It is not the intention of the study to control for counselling modalities or to investigate the ways in which particular counselling modalities led to therapeutic change. However, information about the types of counselling carried out by the school counsellors participating in the study is important contextual information in determining the transferability of the study's findings. At the beginning of each interview, counsellors were asked about their counselling training, experience and preferred modalities. Four of the counsellors had Masters' degrees in counselling, three of which were awarded by a Hong Kong university and one by an Australian university. Three of the counsellors had Masters' degrees in social work, all awarded by a Hong Kong university. One of counsellors had a Certificate in counselling awarded by a UK university. All of the counsellors had received additional, post qualification training in various counselling approaches including emotion focused therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, choice theory / reality therapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based counselling. The counsellors reported using a variety of different approaches in their work with students, including cognitive behavioural therapy (mentioned by five counsellors), choice theory / reality therapy (mentioned by four counsellors) and person-centred therapy, Satir counselling, narrative therapy, solution

focused brief therapy and mindfulness-based therapy (all mentioned by one counsellor). All of the counsellors said that they used different approaches depending of the needs of the individual student, and so they all practiced a form of technical eclecticism. None of the counsellors said that they adhered to one single counselling philosophy or approach.

3.5.3 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using focus questions with students who had undergone, or were currently undergoing, counselling sessions. The focus questions were developed specifically for the project and were adapted from Lynass et al. (2012), whose research used qualitative data collection methods and thematic analysis to identify young people's experience of counselling in secondary schools in the UK, using a modified version of Elliott's (1996) Client Change Interview. This semi-structured interview schedule was developed to enable adolescents to explore their experience of counselling, what they found helpful or unhelpful and the ways in which they have changed since beginning counselling (Lynass et al., 2012). To test the appropriateness of the interview schedule, a pilot study was conducted in which four student participants were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed and reviewed to develop a more focused interview protocol which constituted a better fit for the participants in this context. Data from the pilot study were incorporated into the main study. The protocol was used only as a guide for the interviews, which varied widely as the participants were encouraged to speak about whatever they felt was important or interesting to them. The focus questions used in the student interviews are given in Appendix 3.

One of the inclusion criteria for participants was that they should be sufficiently fluent in English to provide high quality data. English proficiency was not formally assessed, but the researcher informally assessed each individual student's ability to understand and respond to questions. In many cases, the participants were bilingual or had a near native level of English proficiency. A few participants were less fluent, but in no case was a participant's level of English assessed to be inadequate for the study. The researcher used several techniques to elicit good quality responses, including asking participants to explain answers in different ways, paraphrasing responses and asking if these gave an accurate representation, and using pauses to give participants an opportunity to think carefully and elaborate on responses.

The counsellors were interviewed after the student interviews were complete using very similar focus questions which were developed from the student interviews since their perspective on the same phenomenon was being sought and triangulation of data was a key element of the study approach. These focus questions are given in Appendix 4.

Interviews were conducted between 5 September and 7 November 2017. Each interview was recorded on a smartphone recording application and transferred to a secure PC at the researcher's home as soon as practicable after the interview. The mean length of the interviews was 34.4 minutes (SD 6.9 minutes) for students and 55.9 minutes (SD 6.0 minutes) for counsellors.

3.5.4 Data analysis and interpretation

In the search for demi-regularities, thematic analysis was used to derive themes from the data, consistent with the critical realist stance taken. Data from the interviews were analysed in two separate groups (client and counsellors). A set of themes was developed from the data collected from students and another set of themes was developed from the data collected from counsellors. These two sets of themes were then triangulated to develop a series of integrated themes which captured the experiences of both students and counsellors. The process of theme development drew on Buetow's (2010) *saliency analysis* method, where codes are assessed for their relative importance and their theoretical significance. New data were collected, and coding continued until no new codes were needed, at which point the data were regarded as being saturated.

Drawing on the work of Buetow (2010), Braun and Clarke (2006) and Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2011), the following step-by-step procedures to data analysis were adopted to operationalise the critical realist approach using thematic analysis.

Step 1. Initial reading. After each interview was conducted, the audio recording was transcribed and the transcript was read over several times. The act of transcription and multiple reading enabled an immersion in and close familiarity with the data which led to the development of initial ideas about coding. Notes were made after each reading in order to capture any insights gained at this stage, and these notes contributed to the reflexivity which was an important part of the methodology.

Step 2. Open coding. The transcript was open-coded at the semantic level. A computer programme (NVivo 10) was used to assist with the process and keep track of developing codes. Codes were assigned inductively, such that meaning was derived from the data themselves rather than from theory. No *a priori* codes were used, and codes were kept as close to the language of the data as possible in order to ensure that the analysis was grounded in the data. Each segment of text was treated equally and significance was not applied at this stage. This approach to coding has been termed *horizontalization* (Cayne & Loewenthal, 2006).

Step 3. Theme development. Different codes were clustered together to form themes. This was how demi-regularities in the data were identified. A theme's key characteristic is that it "identifies a coherent aspect of the data and tells you something about it, relevant to the research question" and should be "underpinned by a central organizing concept or ... key analytic point" (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 236). Themes are not simply "domain summaries" (Clarke & Braun, 2018, p. 108). At this stage, the themes were tentative and a consideration of the ways in which themes might form a hierarchy and be interrelated was undertaken, resulting in an initial thematic map.

The saliency of codes was considered at this stage. Buetow (2010) notes that recurrence and importance are often conflated in thematic analysis but that the two cannot necessarily be equated. The recurrence of a code does not always imply that it is important, and themes which are important, in the sense that they provide greater theoretical understanding or contribute to addressing a practical problem, may recur infrequently (Buetow, 2010). For this reason, frequency of codes was not the primary property used to assess a code's saliency, but their

importance and recurrence were considered. Recurrence is hard to define and is rather subjective, but a theme was considered to be recurrent if at least half of the participants mentioned something relating to the theme. Two criteria were used to determine if a theme was considered important. First, participants' comments to the effect that the content was really significant were taken into account. Second, if the content was related to something which seemed to address the research questions, or which seemed to have theoretical significance, this was also taken into account. Counselling is a very individual experience and so it was felt likely that different participants would report a range of different experiences. Although some of these experiences may be very common, others may be more idiosyncratic and yet equally important to the individuals concerned. A consideration of saliency enabled codes which may otherwise have been lost by infrequent recurrence, perhaps because they represented idiosyncratic experiences not common to all participants, to be retained and to inform the analysis. The identification of salient but non-recurring codes informed further data collection: where participants reported experiences which were considered important but not recurrent, the questions guiding the semi-structured interviews were adapted on the basis of these codes in order to capture data related to these areas in subsequent interviews.

During theme development, two key features of critical realist analysis were addressed. First, causal mechanisms were developed from the data in the form of the change processes taking place in SBC. Change processes are the mechanisms by which change is proposed to occur during counselling and link activities of the student and the counsellor to therapeutic outcomes. The inferential process of retroduction was used to propose these processes which, by the nature

of critical realist research, are always provisional. Second, the ways in which the context where the SBC took place influenced clients' experience of counselling were investigated.

Step 4. Reviewing themes. The data from which the candidate themes were created were now examined. Some themes were found not to have enough data to support them, in other cases the data were too diverse, and some themes were so similar that they could be combined. Patton's (1990) criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity for judging categories – that data within themes should cohere meaningfully, while there should be clear distinctions between themes – were used to determine the appropriateness of the themes. This said, some overlap between themes was inevitable, though such overlap was kept to a minimum. The data within each theme were reviewed to ensure that each theme adequately represented the data, after which a refined thematic map was constructed, and a consideration of the extent to which the thematic map adequately represented the data set as a whole was undertaken. At this point, the entire data set was re-read in conjunction with the thematic map, data were reordered into different themes and new themes were developed. Finally, themes were ordered into a hierarchy of superordinate and subordinate themes. To this point, themes from the student data set and the counsellor data set had been analysed independently and so the result of this stage was two different sets of themes which satisfactorily represented the data collected from the two categories of participant.

Step 5. Triangulating themes. The two thematic maps developed in Step 4 and the codes from which the themes had been developed were placed side by side. Triangulation – comparison of the themes and their constituent codes – resulted in the development of new themes which combined the experience of both the students and the counsellors. The advantage of combining

the two data sets in this way was that two potentially distinct perspectives could be combined to give a more comprehensive account of the processes taking place, in counselling. In this sense, the triangulation of data led to the study's conclusions being more credible. A disadvantage, however, was that the individual experiences of students and counsellors may have become less visible, and the data analysis may have led to the findings becoming more abstracted from the data itself.

Step 6. Naming and defining themes and their interrelationships. Each of the new themes developed in Stage 5 was named and defined using one or two *in vivo* statements which captured the content and scope of the theme. Following guidance from Clarke et al. (2015), themes were hierarchical. The top level or “overarching” theme captures “an idea underpinning several themes.” At the next level are “themes” which “report in detail on meaning related to a central organising concept.” At the lowest level are “sub-themes” which “capture and develop an important facet of the central organising concept of a theme.” (p. 236). Clarke et al. (2015) recommend no more than three theme levels in order to ensure that a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the data has taken place. The final analysis resulted in two overarching themes: *relationship in context* and *change processes*. These were named *thematic domains* since one captured the non-therapeutic aspects of SBC and the other captured the therapeutic components of SBC. During this stage, causal mechanisms were proposed to account for the ways in which counselling led to change, and which took into account the school and sociocultural context in which the counselling was taking place.

Step 7. Writing the analytic narrative. An analytic commentary was written in which themes and the relationships between them were described and explained. Analytical questions were asked in order to inform the production of a concise, coherent and logical analytic narrative of the themes and the ways in which they were interrelated. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest questions such as: “What does this theme mean?”; “What are the assumptions underpinning it?”; “What are the implications of this theme?”; “What conditions are likely to have given rise to it?”; “What is the overall story the different themes reveal about this topic?” (p. 24). Extracts from the data were used to illustrate the points made. Quotations are given verbatim and hence sometimes contain grammatical and other errors. Salient but infrequently recurring codes were incorporated into the analysis: these codes did not represent themes which were common to the experience of many participants and may have been more idiosyncratic, but added to the nuance and richness of the analysis. Steps 1-7 form the results chapters (Chapters 4 and 5).

Step 8. Relating the analytic narrative to existing literature. Finally, the narrative developed in Step 7 was related to the existing research literature and considered in light of the theoretical framework. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings were suggested. This step addressed the important role of critical realism in conforming, modifying or extending existing theory. Step 8 constitutes the discussion chapter (Chapter 6).

In practice, the analysis was recursive and the steps above were not followed in a strict order. There was a great deal of overlap between the steps as the analysis was conducted, and data were analysed as they were collected, with the ongoing analysis informing the choice of new participants and subsequent data collection. The entire process of data collection and analysis

continued until a point of theoretical saturation was considered to have been reached and no new themes were developed from the data. A new MRT related to the change processes taking place in SBC was developed, and recommendations for school counsellors in Hong Kong schools were produced.

3.6 Ethical issues

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Education University of Hong Kong Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and consent forms were signed by the principals of the participating schools (see Appendix 5) and the participants themselves (see Appendices 6 and 7). Assent from parents was obtained as required by the HREC's guidelines. Participants were told that the interviews were confidential, and that all data would be anonymised before analysis. They were told that they were able to stop the interview at any time and that they could decline to participate in the study if they changed their mind at a later date. They were also given the opportunity to keep a transcript of the interview, though none asked for this.

It is possible that the interviews may have had a negative impact on both the relationship between clients and counsellors and on the participants themselves. Interviews may have brought up difficult material for students and perhaps counsellors, for example. Participants were told that they could approach the researcher or the project's supervisors after the interview for follow-up discussion and referral to additional counselling if necessary and appropriate.

Recordings of interviews were transferred to a password-protected computer to whom only the researcher had access as soon as practicable after each interview, and transcriptions of interviews were also created and stored on the same, password-protected computer. All identifiable information in the transcripts was anonymised. The identity of the schools has not been disclosed in the write-up, and data collected from participants at all three sites were analysed and reported as one data set to ensure anonymity of the participants.

After data analysis was complete, participants were given a summary of the research findings and given the opportunity to comment on the extent to which they found the description an accurate reflection of their experience and if there was anything with which they disagreed. This enabled respondent validation to take place as one means of assessing the validity of the findings. None of the participants raised concerns about the findings at this stage.

3.7 Validity

Validity in qualitative research is generally thought of as the appropriateness of the planning, methods of data collection and analysis and findings (Leung, 2015). In quantitative research there are well-established criteria for assessing validity. This is not the case in qualitative studies, and there is some debate about whether the term ‘validity’ should be applied to qualitative research at all (Smith, 2006). A number of criteria for addressing validity in qualitative research have been proposed in the literature, with *trustworthiness* being a central theme. It has been argued that trustworthiness or credibility can be used as a synonym for validity in the context of

qualitative research (Shenton, 2004), and J. McLeod (2011) suggests that “the question of qualitative validity always comes back to a matter of whether the researcher is plausible and trustworthy” (p. 279). Drawing on the works of Creswell and Miller (2000), Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999), Shenton (2004), and Yardley (2000, 2008), the validity of the present study has been considered in terms of its credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

3.7.1 Credibility

A number of measures were taken to ensure that the study was credible. First, a high level of familiarity with the culture of the participating organisations, necessary to build trust and access to participants, had been developed over many years. Long-term involvement with and sustained presence in the situation being studied is an essential component in establishing the credibility of a study and, indeed, immersion in the data is essential in qualitative research since deep engagement allows rich data to be collected to a point of theoretical saturation. The researcher has worked in Hong Kong schools since 2001 and has a good understanding of the culture and the school context in which the research was set. This kind of involvement is one aspect of the trustworthiness of the researcher, though it is something of a ‘double-edged sword.’ Given the researcher’s position as senior leader within one of the organisations participating in the study, some participants may not have felt able to be candid during interviews, especially given the high-power distance in Hong Kong society generally. Drawing on participants from several schools and ensuring the confidentiality of the participants were measures adopted to counter the problems associated with this positional authority.

Second, and related to this, is the credibility of the researchers conducting a study by virtue of their background, qualifications and experience. In the present study, the researcher has two decades of experience working with young people in schools, sixteen of which were in Hong Kong, and he holds master's degrees in education management and counselling. As such, he was well placed and suitably qualified to conduct counselling research in an educational context.

Third, researchers should ensure that “a rich picture of the attitudes, needs or behaviour of those under scrutiny may be constructed based on the contributions of a range of people” (Yardley, 2008, p. 66). In the present study, this was achieved by including participants from different organisations. Interviews were as detailed as possible, and the counselling technique of Socratic questioning, often used in counselling (Leder, 2016), was employed. The interviewer was a trained counsellor who took a non-directive stance in the use of questions, allowing participants the freedom to take the interview in their own direction.

Fourth, methods to encourage honest responses from participants were used. It was made clear to participants that they were able to withdraw their participation at any time and also that their anonymity would be guaranteed. As noted above, the researcher's own position as a senior manager in one of the schools may have deterred some participants from giving completely honest responses, and recruiting participants from other schools addressed this issue to some extent. Iterative questioning was used during interviews to clarify and deepen the participants' views, and this seemed to be especially important since the participants were adolescents.

Fifth, the collection of data from both students and counsellors enabled the triangulation of data sources to be carried out. This is a unique feature of the present study: no other qualitative studies into SBC have combined the perspectives of both students and counsellors, and this aspect of data collection and analysis added to the credibility of the study.

J. McLeod (2011) identifies a number of challenges to be considered when collecting interview data, and these were taken into account. First, the client may not have a clear recollection of the events being described. To address this issue, participants were selected who had recently had, or who were still undergoing, a series of counselling sessions, and participants were interviewed at different points during the counselling process in which they were engaged. Research evidence suggests that reporting of past events is not necessarily inaccurate, especially the reporting of experiences which are of particular importance for the individual (Blane, 1996). The attention given to saliency in theme development also ensured that the analysis focused on these more salient and hence, presumably, more accurate representations of events. Second, it may have been difficult for participants to formulate thoughts into a coherent response since they had probably never been asked to do so before, and the age of participants, and perhaps the stress at being in an interview situation, may also have made it harder for them to articulate themselves. The fact that all the interviews were conducted in English may also have made it difficult for some participants to communicate clearly in a language other than their mother tongue. To minimise this difficulty, one of the inclusion criteria was that participants should have a fluent or native ability in spoken English. Although this was not assessed formally by means of English test scores or other quantitative measures, the researcher made a determination of English proficiency informally in each interview. Many of the participants were bilingual or very fluent

in English. Two of the schools (Schools 1 and 2) had a significant number of English-speaking teachers and so student were immersed in English for most of the school day.

Further, during interviews, questions were asked several times in different ways and were followed up with queries asking for more detail to provide opportunities for participants to speak more fully about their experiences. None of the participants' level of English was considered to render them unable to provide good quality data. Finally, the participant may have wanted to tell the researcher what he or she thought the researcher wanted to hear, possibly another result of the high-power distance cultural context of Hong Kong. It was made very clear to participants that confidentiality was assured and that any information shared was strictly for research purposes only.

3.7.2 Dependability

The dependability of research concerns the reliability, predictability and consistency of the findings (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). In quantitative work, the researcher seeks to show that the study is replicable and that the same results could be achieved by another person employing the same techniques. In qualitative work, the researcher's interpretation of data is an essential part of the research design, and so the idea of a standardised set of methods, replicable by an objective researcher, is not pertinent. Shenton (2004) notes that dependability is a more appropriate measure in this type of research, and that such dependability can be demonstrated by a consideration of the transparency, coherence and rigour of the research.

Research is transparent if it is carefully conceived, well-constructed and presented and should contain sufficient detail to enable a future researcher to repeat the work, even though they may not gain the same results or interpret data in the same way. Shenton (2004) calls this research design a “prototype model” (p. 71), and Yardley (2008) recommends that a study should explain how the participants were selected, how the interview schedule was formulated, and which steps were used in the analysis. The report should include sections covering the research design, its implementation, and the operational detail of data gathering. This information thus has been covered by the above sections in detail. A reflective appraisal of the project, evaluating the effectiveness of the processes undertaken, should also be included. Accordingly, a reflective summary of the process of planning the study, data collection and data analysis is given in the conclusions chapter.

Qualitative research should also be coherent, meaning that there is a good fit between the research being conducted and the underlying philosophical assumptions of the methodological approach. Since thematic analysis is orthogonal to both the data and the philosophical orientation of the researcher, this is not an issue per se, so long as the theoretical orientation and other methodological components are clear and appropriate (Clarke & Braun, 2018). The critical realist philosophical stance taken in the study and the relationship of thematic analysis to this stance are given in detail above.

Finally, rigour relates to the thoroughness of the study in terms of both how suitable the sample is to the research question and the thoroughness of the analysis. The participants were selected

purposively with the aims of the study in mind, and the use of thematic analysis to a point of theoretical saturation supported a thorough analysis.

3.7.3 Confirmability

Confirmability is a measure of the extent to which the findings of the study reflect the subjects' experiences, notwithstanding that the values, assumptions and experiences of the researcher will affect the research questions, the data collected and the interpretation of results. Shenton (2004) suggests that "steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher" (p. 72). This is not to say that the researcher should attempt to adopt a neutral and objective stance: such a position would be neither possible nor desirable, and researcher subjectivity in qualitative studies has been described as a "resource", rather than a "problem to be managed" (Clarke & Braun, 2018, p. 107), and this is certainly the case in a critical realist approach, where the researcher's interpretation of the data is necessary to the inferential process of retroduction. The primary means of utilising researcher subjectivity as a resource is careful attention to reflexivity and a full awareness and acknowledgement of the researcher's stance. As part of the transparent approach to the research, the reflective commentaries given in Chapters 3 and 7 were developed from the notes taken during data collection and theme development to demonstrate a recognition and acknowledgement of the role of the researcher in the process of data collection and interpretation (Binder, Holgersen, & Nielsen, 2009).

Several other measures were taken to ensure, as far as possible, that the participants' experiences were reflected as fully and accurately as possible in the final analysis. First, the researcher worked with a colleague during theme development and an independent audit by another colleague was carried out to confirm that the account being given in the study was credible and had been arrived at transparently and systematically (Smith, 2003). Although the subjectivity of the researcher is a resource in the sense that creativity is needed in the inferential process of retrodution, the underlying causative mechanisms are ontologically real structures and so data analysis should not be idiosyncratic. Hence, the intention of the audit was to ensure that the analysis was plausible. In practice, the audit consisted of a series of conversations between the researcher and the auditor in which the research design, data collection and data analysis were examined. Second, disconfirming evidence – data which do not fit into the categories which have been developed during the analysis – were specifically looked for, and this was helpful in two ways: if respondents recognised these cases as being unusual, this provided additional support for the conclusions reached in the study; also, if it was recognised that a case was unusual and explanation could be given for its unusualness, then our understanding of the situation could become deeper. Finally, respondent validation was carried out by giving the respondents a summary of the research findings and asking the respondents to what extent they find the description an accurate reflection of their experience.

Despite the measures taken to address threats to the confirmability of the data and the reflexive approach taken throughout, it should be acknowledged that the research was designed and carried out, and data interpreted by one researcher. The pro-counselling bias of the researcher

may have influenced the data analysis and the conclusions drawn, which should be treated as provisional and open to amendment given additional research.

3.7.4 Transferability

Although generalisability of the study's findings is impossible in the sense that may be achieved in a quantitative study, transferability of the findings to similar contexts may be possible. As noted in the literature review, Asian culture has specific characteristics which differentiate it from Anglo-American and European cultures (Kim et al., 2001), and much variation also exists within the wider Asian culture. Although strongly influenced by Western culture, Hong Kong shows many elements of a collectivist, high power-distance society based on Confucianist values (Hue, 2008; Lee & Leung, 2015). Brockner et al. (2001), for example, note that an individual's opinion is perceived as relatively less important in high power-distance societies such as Hong Kong than in Western sociocultural environments. As such, the voices of young people may carry relatively less weight in Hong Kong, and less emphasis may be placed on the individual's perspective, the latter being an important component of most counselling modalities. In such a sociocultural environment, adolescents may be more reluctant to disclose their own experiences. Counselling may also be perceived as less helpful in a society where talking is considered inefficient, time consuming and impractical (Busiol, 2016). Confidentiality may be of particular concern in such a highly cohesive and collectivist society as Hong Kong, where there is a poor understanding that counsellors are ethically prohibited from disclosing confidential information about clients. Confidentiality in counselling relationships with adolescents is often complex and

ambiguous (Jenkins, 2010; Jenkins & Palmer, 2012), and in Hong Kong this ambiguity can be accentuated. For these reasons, the transferability of previous research findings to the Hong Kong context may not be possible, and the study's findings may offer novel insights into the Chinese context. A consideration of the extent of transferability of the findings of the present study to other contexts may be possible, and Shenton's (2004) recommendations to include detailed information about the context of the research was followed to allow readers to draw conclusions about relevance to other such contexts. This information has been provided in the sections above.

Transferability of theoretical generalisations from the study to different settings may allow generalisability in a wider sense. Shenton (2004) suggests that "the accumulation of findings from studies staged in different settings might enable a more inclusive, overall picture to be gained" and that a "baseline understanding" with which the results of subsequent work should be compared can be developed (p. 70).

3.8 Reflexive commentary

Reflexivity is an essential component of qualitative research (Clarke & Braun, 2018). The researcher's role in every stage of the research process – from framing the research questions to designing data collection instruments, data collection and interpretation and the presentation of findings – should be acknowledged and made clear.

My approach to the research project has been influenced by my own experience as a school administrator and counsellor in Hong Kong. While informed by the literature, the aims of the project reflect my own view of what is important, my preference for qualitative work and my leaning towards humanistic approaches to counselling and research, and the research questions reflect these biases.

My interactions with participants might have been influenced by my professional experience, particularly as a senior leader at one of the schools. I was aware that the responses of participants at my own school could have been influenced by their knowledge of my position. Assurances of confidentiality were discussed with each participant before any data were collected from them, and I tried to set up as comfortable and reassuring an environment as possible. Recruiting participants from other schools was helpful in the sense that I was not in a position of authority in relation to them.

My own desire to conclude that counselling is a helpful and positive experience may have biased the data and the analysis. In the interviews, participants may have felt that they needed to report positive experiences, and data analysis was conducted entirely by me, although consultation with other colleagues throughout the process of coding and theme development, and an audit process, were part of the research design. Collaboration with other researchers is often helpful in qualitative research: discussions about data as they are collected, and ongoing analysis can be invaluable in bringing about greater awareness of one's own assumptions and biases.

Discussions with my supervisors, other academic professionals and colleagues at the schools

provided helpful insights into the research processes and also served to highlight my own biases and ‘blind spots.’

Incorporating a range of perspectives into qualitative research can address the bias of the researcher and ensure that the voice of no one group is privileged over any other (Dingwall, 1992). One of the aims of the present study was to give voice to participants and to build an account of school counselling which took into consideration different perspectives. For this reason, students and counsellors from three schools were interviewed, and the data from students and counsellors were incorporated into single sets for analysis. Themes developed from both sets of data were combined to produce thematic domains with themes integrated from all the data. As such, no individual’s or group’s experience was given prominence.

Finally, presenting a summary of the findings to participants and asking for feedback helped to ensure that the participants had a voice at all stages in the research and was intended to make clear any biases in data analysis.

3.9 Summary

The methodology adopted in the study is based on thematic analysis, located in a critical realist research paradigm. Critical realism posits a stratified realist ontology, where private psychological events are regarded as real, with an epistemological emphasis on the interpretation of experience. Critical realism uses existing theory to generate a hypothesis in the form of a mid-

range theory which is then modified based on data. The key elements in any critical realist analysis are the search for demi-regularities, abduction and retroduction of data in the search for causal mechanisms which are activated by particular contexts. These elements were operationalised using thematic analysis, a methodologically flexible set of procedures, and a consideration of saliency.

After a pilot study was conducted to narrow the focus questions informing the interviews with participants, 25 secondary school students from three schools in Hong Kong who were receiving counselling or had recently completed a series of counselling sessions, were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Eight counsellors from the schools were also interviewed. Data were coded at a semantic level keeping as close to the participants' accounts as possible, and themes developed inductively and recursively. Theoretical sampling and analysis occurred concurrently until data saturation had been reached.

Several measures were taken to improve the credibility of the findings, the most important being long-term involvement with the research locations, drawing on the experience of participants from several locations, and respondent validation. Researcher reflexivity was also an important component of establishing the study's credibility. Input from a colleague during the theme development stage, and a consideration of saliency in theme development, also improved credibility. The study may be transferable to other schools in Hong Kong, and details provided about the schools which participated in the study will enable school counsellors from other schools to determine whether the study's findings are transferrable to their own school context. A set of proposed guidelines for making counselling more effective for Hong Kong adolescents

in school settings is consistent with critical realism's emphasis on effecting social change and it is hoped that this will help school counsellors to improve their service provision.

Chapter 4. Findings: Relationship in context

4.1 Overview

Data analysis was conducted on data obtained from student interviews and counsellor interviews separately to generate two sets of themes which were then combined to give two thematic domains, labelled *relationship in context* and *change processes*. An overview of both domains is presented in this chapter, and the first of these domains is presented in detail. The second domain is presented in Chapter 5.

4.2 Introduction

Themes from the student data set and the counsellor data set were analysed independently, resulting in two different sets of themes which represented the data collected from each group of participants (See Step 4 of 3.4.4. Data analysis and interpretation). These two sets of themes are given in Appendices 1 and 2. The two separate sets of themes and the codes from which they had been developed were then compared and integrated, resulting in new themes which combined the data from both sets of participants. Two overarching themes were produced which were labelled thematic domains since they encompass all the themes which were developed from the data: *relationship in context* and *change processes*. A theme diagram, summarising the final result of data analysis, is given in Figure 4.1.

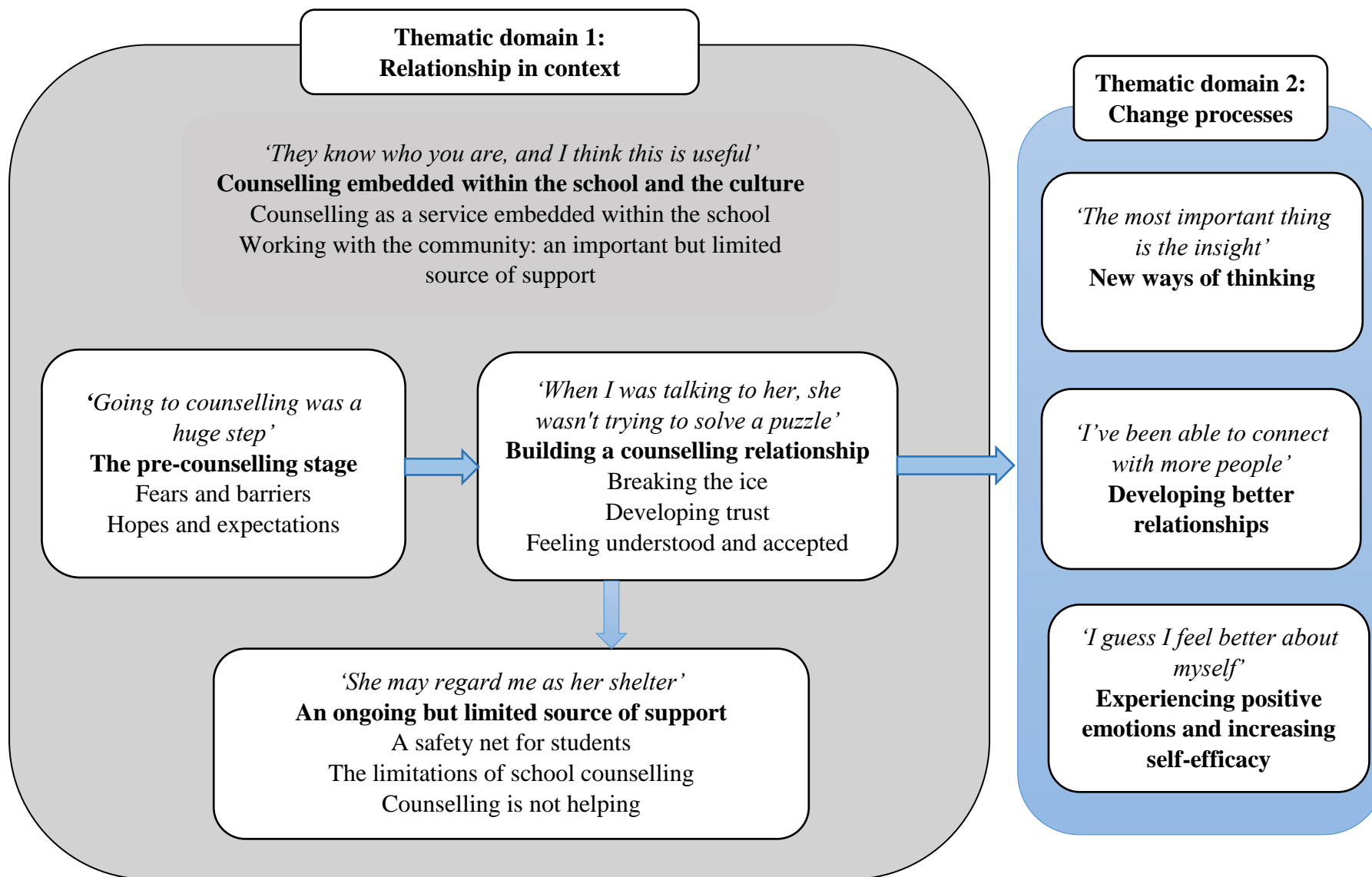


Figure 4.1. Thematic domains

The first of the thematic domains is labelled *relationship in context*. This domain contains four themes which describe the macro-process taking place as students contemplate counselling and then engage in building a relationship with their counsellor. The domain also includes the ways in which the sociocultural context of the school influences students' and counsellors' experience of SBC. The central organising concept of the *relationship in context* thematic domain is that the cultural and organisational context in which counselling occurs has a significant impact on the process of relationship building and the consequences of the relationship which develops. After experiencing significant barriers to attending counselling, students quickly established a very strong, stable relationship with their counsellor which became a source of ongoing support, but which could also foster dependency. The counselling relationship enabled change processes to take place. There are four themes in the thematic domain of *relationship in context*, each labelled with an *in vivo* quotation, as follows:

- Theme 1. “They know who you are, and I think this is useful”: Counselling embedded within the school and the culture
- Theme 2. “Going to counselling was a huge step”: The pre-counselling stage
- Theme 3. “When I was talking to her, she wasn’t trying to solve a puzzle”: Building a counselling relationship
- Theme 4. “She may regard me as her shelter”: An ongoing but limited source of support

A summary of these themes is given in Table 4.1. Each theme has two or three subthemes and will be considered in turn.

Table 4.1. Thematic domain: Relationship in context

Central organising concept: The cultural and organisational context in which counselling occurs has a significant impact on the process of relationship building and the consequences of the relationship which develops. After experiencing strong barriers to attending counselling, students quickly establish a very strong, stable relationship with their counsellor which becomes a source of ongoing support, but which can also foster dependency. The counselling relationship enables change processes to take place.

Theme	Sub-theme	Central organising concept	Representative quotation
Counselling embedded within the school and the culture	Counselling as a service embedded within the school Working with the community: an important but limited source of support	The embeddedness of counselling within the cultural and organisational life of the school provided counsellors with opportunities to increase the effectiveness of their service, but it also set limits on what they could achieve; the support of other stakeholders, although limited for organisational and cultural reasons, was important to providing good counselling outcomes.	‘They know who you are, and I think this is useful’ (Counsellor B)
The pre-counselling stage	Fears and barriers Hopes and expectations	Students had hopes and expectations about what counselling could do for them, but they also had fears, many of which were related to the school context, and inhibited them from going to counselling	‘Going to counselling was a huge step’ (Student E)
Building a counselling relationship	Breaking the ice Developing trust Feeling understood and accepted	Over time, students came to see counselling as a surprisingly helpful resource and developed a stable relationship with the counsellor which was characterised by trust, informality and equality and in which students felt accepted and understood.	‘When I was talking to her, she wasn’t trying to solve a puzzle’ (Student A)
An ongoing but limited source of support	A safety net for students The limitations of school counselling Counselling is not helping	The close, informal relationship which developed between a counsellor and a student often became a source of long-term, ongoing emotional support. Students described their counsellor as a ‘safety net’ which they perceived as helpful but which could also foster dependency on the counsellor. This relationship was made possible in the context of the school setting.	‘She may regard me as her s shelter’ (Counsellor B)

4.3 Theme 1. “They know who you are, and I think this is useful”: Counselling embedded within the school and the culture

The central organising concept of this theme is that the embeddedness of counselling within the cultural and organisational life of the school provided counsellors with opportunities to increase the effectiveness of their service, but it also set limits on what they could achieve; the support of other stakeholders, although limited for organisational and cultural reasons, was important to providing good counselling outcomes.

While other themes have been developed by combining themes from student and counsellor data, Theme 1 was developed exclusively from interviews carried out with counsellors. The counsellors have a wider perspective than the students and they spoke at length about the sociocultural context of the schools and their embeddedness into the school organisational structure, and how this had an impact on their work with students. Students, on the other hand, were not very aware of the wider context and so there is almost no reference to this in the student interviews. The context, however, is highly significant to the study’s findings and impacts all subsequent themes. Theme 1 has two subthemes.

4.3.1 Subtheme 1. Counselling as a service embedded within the school

The counsellors described the counselling service they provided as part of a wider set of school systems and not independent from the rest of the school community. All the counsellors had

other roles at the school – some more extensive than others – and this led to a sense of counselling being embedded within the organisational and cultural life of the school. Examples of other roles taken on by counsellors were: coordinator of a programme of personal, social and health education (PSHE); advisor for academic projects; supervisor of extracurricular activities such as sports; leader of the university guidance department; coordinator of a mentoring programme and home room teacher. Counsellors valued this embeddedness and thought that having a wider role in the school was so helpful that they actively sought out opportunities to work with students in other capacities, as Counsellor C described:

I think it's definitely very helpful so long as we're not – there's not that conflict of interest. I didn't need to be a[n academic] supervisor this year but I opted to do one, and I even approached the teachers – the supervisors here and said, 'I'm happy to do this one student.'

Counsellors felt that being part of the wider school community had several benefits. First, it allowed them to have a much better understanding of students' experience of school and hence to develop a deeper connection with them, as Counsellor B explained:

I think that is useful because it's stable, they know that you're here. The other thing is they know who you are, and I think this is useful.

Second, counsellors felt that being involved in various aspects of school life was helpful since this made them more approachable. Third, having a wider role in the school enabled counselling

to happen in wider contexts and in more diverse ways. Counsellor D summarised how useful it was to be part of the wider school community:

A working knowledge of a lot of things around the school is very helpful because you can really get a sense of what the kids are feeling ... You know the pressures they're under. You know how busy they are. You know some of the personalities of the teachers and their expectations, so you can kind of understand where the kids are coming from ... You see the dynamics on the playground, in the clubs ... So you know whether they're engaging in assemblies or house days or just always sitting on the side-lines, I think that does build up a picture which can build a lot of empathy. Whereas if you just came in and sat for an hour with the student, it's probably a bit too detached.

Although counsellors generally felt that their embeddedness in the school had several advantages, they also felt that it had a downside. First, having multiple roles in school sometimes made it harder for students to trust the counsellor. Counsellor E felt that counsellors "wearing many hats" was "quite an issue ... for people to feel comfortable," and Counsellor G expressed a similar concern about counsellors having dual roles:

I think counsellors who take on dual roles such as a counsellor who's also a teacher, a counsellor who's also a university counsellor, I think that when the student sees you, well, you can grade them or you could be writing their college applications. I find they're ... less willing to share.

Second, having other duties meant that counsellors did not have enough time to see individual students for counselling. Third, there was a conflict between the way counsellors wanted to interact with students as a counsellor and the way they needed to behave in other contexts, as Counsellor D explained:

It's not a comfortable feeling if you have to chase a kid for a deadline or pull them up on something, and then sit down and say, 'You can tell me anything you want and I'm here to listen.'

4.3.2 Subtheme 2. Working with the community: An important but limited source of support

Counsellors were all very clear that the counselling service was an important and necessary part of the school and provided a great deal of value to students who did not have other support or who were experiencing crisis. Counsellors felt that teachers' support for and understanding of counselling was important to their work, but their feelings about the extent to which the counselling service was valued by teachers and administrators were mixed. Counsellors reported that teachers' understanding of counselling was not always very strong but was better when there was increased contact between teachers and counsellors. Being available for advice and building a relationship with the teachers was seen as being helpful to counsellors' work and in developing teachers' understanding of their role. Counsellor G also described the way in which teachers may come to understand counselling better by seeking advice:

The teachers come to you for their personal lives and on how to manage conflicts in the workplace, I think [this] just helps them understand counselling a little better and they realise that they can trust you and you do give good advice and they'll be more free to pass students on to you.

Some counsellors felt that teachers were sometimes not very supportive of counselling, partly because they did not understand it well and may need more training, and Counsellor E described this as a “struggle with the teachers.” Counsellors gave specific examples of how teachers’ misunderstanding of counselling could hinder their work. Counsellor G, for example, felt that teachers confused counselling with learning support and this caused misunderstanding. The same counsellor also reported that teachers could pry into what was happening in counselling, and that this could inhibit a student’s willingness to disclose. Counsellor E felt that some teachers thought that students were using counselling as an excuse to miss lessons, which made the students reluctant to come to counselling:

Some of them just do not buy into counselling itself. It happens like, some of the teachers would think that students would come for counselling just to skip a lesson. For every single student, they have that in mind, which is obviously not true. And that causes an emotional burden for the students to come as well.

Counsellors generally felt that their work was valued and supported by the senior leadership staff in the school. Counsellors reported being overworked, having a heavy case load and having to deal with difficult cases which they felt were beyond their ability to handle.

Counsellors regarded their work with parents as being an important part of their job. While some parents were open to working with the counselling service and were happy for their children to attend, others were less supportive and even hostile to the idea of counselling. Counsellors believed that this hostility towards counselling was related to cultural reasons. First, parents might feel ashamed that their children were attending counselling:

‘I’ve heard a number of them say that when counselling is involved, the parents feel shameful ... They’re ashamed or terrified that I would tell their parents that they’re coming in for counselling’ (Counsellor G).

This feeling of shame was linked to the cultural value of wanting to keep problems within the family:

In Hong Kong I think that they are still very traditional. They think that problems should be solved inside a family. You don’t need to seek other support (Counsellor H).

The Chinese culture may think ... the bad things about the family should not be disclosed to other people... They have this firm belief (Counsellor B).

This feeling of shame was transmitted directly to students by their parents:

‘Maybe, there are quite a number of Chinese student, they told me after maybe one or two sessions, that their parent ask them, for example, not to tell any other people that their parent divorced. It's quite common’ (Counsellor B).

Second, counsellors noted that parents might be uncomfortable with their children attending counselling due to the stigma associated with mental health issues in Hong Kong:

Actually for the parents also have the thought that - the son need to go to ... talk with [the counsellor] means the son have a problem. He’s crazy. In Hong Kong all the counselling is like this because the parents do not accept [counselling] (Counsellor H).

Third, counsellors noted that counselling was not well understood in Hong Kong: ‘In Hong Kong community, the whole counselling stuff or this kind of support service is not well-embraced or not common’ (Counsellor E).

Counsellors said they organised talks and workshops for parents on various topics, and that these sessions were helpful as outreach to the parent community. Some counsellors described being approached by parents who were stressed about problems with their children and were looking for advice and support. Counsellor G, for example, described her interactions with parents as increasingly common and supported by her position in the school:

We're seeing more and more family counselling these days. And I have parents, one particular mother who reaches out to me quite a lot. And she's actually said she preferred talking to me than outside counsellors or psychologists because I know everything already. And she actually confided some things with me that's very confidential.

4.4 Theme 2. "Going to counselling was a huge step": The pre-counselling stage

The central organising concept of this theme is that students had hopes and expectations about what counselling could do for them, but they also had fears, many of which were related to the school context, and inhibited them from going to counselling.

Both counsellors and students spoke about the elements of this theme. Counsellors were very aware of students' apprehension about coming to counselling and spoke in more detail about the reasons for this. Counsellors, however, did not seem to fully appreciate the barriers students experienced as they contemplated counselling, which Student E described as a "huge step." This theme is divided into two subthemes.

4.4.1 Subtheme 1. Fears and barriers

4.4.1.1 The students' perspective

Most students were familiar with the counselling service and knew who the counsellors were, but they had little or no concept of what counselling was and did not think of it as an option for them. Most students experienced considerable doubt and hesitation before they began counselling. One of the most frequently mentioned concerns was related to confidentiality, concerns about which were sometimes associated with the counsellors being part of the school and, in some cases, having dual roles. Student B said, for example:

Because I know that the counsellors here are also [college counsellors] or they're also other members of other things. It also has that whole like, 'If I tell them, they might see me one way as a counsellor. But then now, my ... [college counsellor] will also know this.'

Students also frequently said that they were afraid of being labelled by other students, teachers or the school administration as “an attention seeker,” “someone who needs counselling” or “having something wrong.” Student S said that “I think that most of the students, or even teachers, perceive it as kind of labelling” and that “[i]f you go to the counsellor, it means that you have some problems, that you're different from other people.”. Counselling was seen as a way to “give in” to problems for weak people. Student Y did not want her classmates to know she was attending counselling in case they labelled her as a “lunatic.” This fear was expressed succinctly

by Student B, who described her reticence to attend counselling because of what other students might think of her:

If you get counselling it usually spreads out that like, ‘Something’s wrong with her. Something is going on.’ That was the main point of me not wanting to go to counselling, especially in this school, which was because I was afraid of how other people would start seeing me or making up rumours and stuff like that.

Students felt that it was sometimes necessary to adopt measures to hide their attendance at counselling since “social exclusion” (Student J) could be a result of being labelled as needing counselling, and students also reported that their parents could be unsupportive of their attendance at counselling and even described having to hide their attendance from parents, as student Y explained:

My parents don’t really like me going to counsellors, my parents don't really know I go to counselling. They don't really know. They did know, but they don't know I'm going to counselling right now. They thought I stopped. Because especially my dad, he thinks people who goes to counselling are the bad students, and they're all losers if they go to counselling, the school will think badly of them, and it will affect their grades. It will affect how teachers think of them, so that’s the downside because I really can’t tell my parents about it.

4.4.1.2 The counsellors' perspective

Counsellors thought that many students did not know what counselling was; their lack of familiarity with and understanding of counselling made them guarded and initially not comfortable sharing with the counsellor. These students became more comfortable when they learned more about counselling. Counsellors thought that some students, however, had a more negative view and were less open to counselling. Counsellors felt that students were resistant to counselling because they feared being labelled as “problematic” or “psychotic” students whose problems are “pathological” and that they worried about the way friends and parents would perceive them if they knew they were seeing a counsellor. Counsellors felt that students were sometimes embarrassed to be seen coming to counselling and that some students saw counselling as a consequence of being in trouble or as a punishment. Counsellor G shared her experience that students were sometimes embarrassed to be seen coming to counselling:

If they ... can come to me anonymously, I think they would very much more prefer that. And even walking outside my room when the other students waiting in the counselling reception area, they get very embarrassed, they either rush out or I just had one student yesterday where she put her laptop right next to her face so the person sitting on the sofa waiting doesn't see her face.

Counsellors also observed that students' reluctance to come to counselling was related to the cultural context. Counsellor A drew a comparison between her experience of working in Australia and in Hong Kong to highlight this aspect of students' experience:

I think there is a cultural element, yes. I've not really got much of an evidence base on which to say that except that I have worked in Hong Kong for a long time and I've also worked in Australia. In Australia, it is much more if you're feeling the need for help, you go on and seek it, whereas in Hong Kong, you kind of sit on it and wait until something desperate happens and you can't cope anymore before you go and seek any help. It's mostly hidden ... Problems within marriages, problems within families, they're behind closed doors. A lot of our students subscribe to that. You just keep it inside.

Counsellors felt they needed to reach out proactively to students in order to encourage them to use the service, and they thought that promoting the counselling service seemed to have made a difference in helping students to feel more comfortable about coming to counselling and reducing the stigma of going to counselling.

4.4.2 Subtheme 2. Hopes and expectations

4.4.2.1 The students' perspective

Some students were open minded about going to see the school counsellor. A small minority of students said that they did not care what other people thought or that they liked the idea of going to counselling. Student H, for example, said that “going [to] counselling is not a bad thing at all

and I don't need to be ashamed because of counselling.” A small number of students did have hopes that counselling would be helpful. Student Q summarised well:

I thought that counselling could have helped me, because keeping everything inside you is unhealthy. And then people said that having counselling would be a good idea for you if you have a lot of problems. My first thought was, ‘Yes, let’s give it a try because, why not?’

4.4.2.2 The counsellors’ perspective

Counsellors recognised a willingness to come to counselling in some cases. Counsellor A went as far as to say, “I wouldn’t say there is any negative feeling for counselling in the school,” although students were “guarded” and had a “natural apprehension” about “sitting in a room with a vaguely strange adult.” Counsellors thought that some students were familiar with the term “counselling” and saw it as talking about problems which would be helpful to them. Counsellor E felt that, “in general, for our students, I think they know about the word counselling. It’s like talking to people, to others, about themselves.” Counsellor D also felt that some students did have a positive view of counselling, and self-referral was evidence for this:

I do think the ones that self-refer seem to have a positive view of it. They’ve taken the steps. ‘I think there’s some help there. I need help. I’m going to give it a go. What harm can it do? I’m expecting something good or something to change

hopefully for the better.’ So I would say there is some positive idea of it from those students.

4.5 Theme 3. “When I was talking to her, she wasn’t trying to solve a puzzle”: Building a counselling relationship

The central organising concept of this theme is that, over time, students came to see counselling as a surprisingly helpful resource and developed a stable relationship with the counsellor which was characterised by trust, informality and equality and in which students felt accepted and understood. Students spoke more than counsellors about the ice-breaking process and this seems to have been more important and memorable to them, probably because beginning counselling is a regular and familiar experience for counsellors but a unique and emotionally challenging one for students. Both counsellors and students spoke extensively about the process of developing trust and feeling understood and accepted. This theme has three subthemes.

4.5.1 Subtheme 1. Breaking the ice

4.5.1.1 The students’ perspective

Students reported an initial “ice breaking” phase in counselling. Some reported being indifferent to counselling at first, but most felt anxious due to not knowing what it would be like, being

reluctant to disclose information to a stranger or worried about having disclosed too much in the initial meetings. Student X was “scared, nervous because I didn’t know him. I thought he’s a stranger. He’s more like a teacher or something” and Student Y was “nervous and uncomfortable because I didn’t trust them yet.” Student B found herself thinking, “God, what did I just say? Am I in trouble? Is something going to happen?” Students said that counselling was awkward and unnatural at first. Many students reported that they were initially reluctant to disclose information about themselves to the counsellor. Student N summarised his initial feelings about counselling in the following way:

It was kind of awkward at some moment and like the first few time you just cannot let things out, you cannot really talk about your problem that much, just talk about the surface of it because you’re just pretty scared and really not familiar with the environment and procedure of the counselling service.

Many students reported that their first experiences of counselling were comfortable due to the environment and the welcoming attitude of the counsellor. Familiarity with the counsellor prior to the first meeting also helped students to feel more comfortable about counselling, as Student E explained:

Actually before I started regular counselling, I had a brief session with [the counsellor] over the stress I had for being a prefect. That counselling session started making me realise that I could use counselling as a source of or a solution to some of the problems I was experiencing.

Although students were almost always afraid of or indifferent to counselling, occasionally a student could see the benefits of counselling and went to a session despite feeling uncomfortable. Students reported that, over time, their perceptions about counselling became more positive and had unexpected benefits. Student E said, “I thought I knew something about what to expect but it turned out to be quite different than I thought” and that counselling “was a lot more useful than I thought it would be ... I realised that counselling is very effective.” Student B, who had been mandated to attend counselling, said it had helped “in other ways that I did not expect,” and found it so useful that “personally, I feel like it was worth getting into trouble in year 9 for.” Students changed their perception of counselling as being something only for serious problems, as Student N explained:

I felt counselling was for very severe or intense problems. But now ... even if you have problems with a smaller thing, counselling could still help and make it easier ... Even good kids can go to counselling because they could just feel sad, feel stressful.

4.5.1.2 The counsellors' perspective

Counsellors thought that one of the biggest challenges to their work with students was the unwillingness of students to make personal disclosures since they were talking to someone who is, initially, a stranger. Chinese culture in Hong Kong made it particularly difficult for students to open up to the counsellor initially, as Counsellor B explained:

The Chinese culture may think the family, the bad things about the family should not be disclosed to other people. There's a saying in Chinese like that, so it is quite firm in the mind. What else? The way that they deal with bereavement is also related to the bad things happen in a family, yes. Any things that are not really good which happen inside a family they would not want – I cannot say all of them but, yes, quite a number of them, they have this firm belief.

4.5.2 Subtheme 2. Developing trust

4.5.2.1 The students' perspective

Developing trust was the most significant processes identified as being supportive of relationship building and several students made it clear that trust was essential for any disclosure to take place. Students said that building trust took time and depended on the counsellor proving to the students that they would not disclose personal information. Student X said that, over time, his counsellor became “one of the person I trusted the most at school.” Trust was also a result of the counsellor being “real” and engaging in some relevant self-disclosure, as Student F explained:

It's like a two-way relation, while he gives advice, we do understand that he could have problems as well, so the suggestion he gives makes it more trustworthy because he can say he's having problems, he solved it before, that's where his advice and

suggestions are coming from. That makes it a little bit more trustworthy in a way, it's more believable.

Over time, the relationship between student and counsellor became less formal. The developing informality was seen in the routines around counselling becoming more informal and it became more natural for the student to approach the counsellor. As the relationship became less formal, students came to see the counsellor as someone with whom they could have an equal relationship. Student X said, "as time goes on, after we talk a few times, I started to find him myself instead of he coming to me." Student A said that she would "drop in sometimes even without notice when I see her available" or just "pop by and say hi." Many students described their counsellors as a friend, someone who was "on my side every time" (Student W) and even someone who was "like an older brother to me" (Student X). Communication with the counsellor became more natural and less inhibited. Student S said, "[e]ven sometimes I say foul language in the counselling session. It's still fine."

4.5.2.2 The counsellors' perspective

Counsellors felt that it was important for students to be able to trust them and were free to be able to say whatever they wanted. Counsellors felt that, in a fairly short time, most students became comfortable with the counselling relationship. Students taking more of a leading role in counselling was evidence of their greater level of comfort with counselling.

Counsellor G said that, “after a few sessions, they get the hang of the system and they start telling me what they want to talk about.”

A human connection between student and counsellor was at the centre of counsellors’ descriptions of their relationships with students. Counsellor F summarised the relationship-building process well by describing a specific incident which stuck in his mind where he had offered a student part of his breakfast, a small act that had had a big impact on the relationship and an incident which underlined the importance of the student sensing the counsellor’s genuine concern: “When they know that you are helping, you are caring [about] them sincerely, then they will open up and let you in.” Counsellor F felt it was important that students saw him as a “human being” and not as an authority figure like a teacher, and he “would tell them what is the difference between counsellor and the teachers to make them feel easier.”

Counsellors thought that the match between student and counsellor was important in establishing a good relationship and felt that a flexible approach was needed within the counselling relationship.

Counsellors felt that students saw counselling as a safe place to be. Confidentiality was not mentioned very much by the counsellors. Counsellor G, however, did say that telling students that the content of counselling sessions would not be disclosed to parents, and that parents would not even know the student was seeing a counsellor was an important factor in how much a student would open up, and this was a helpful consequence of the counsellor being part of the school:

So in a way, they share more with me than if I were an outside counsellor I think, because as an outside counsellor, they know mum and dad sent them to me, so they may not want to share with me. Over here, they may feel like I don't have any ties with their parents so they share more freely.

4.5.3 Subtheme 3. Feeling understood and accepted

4.5.3.1 The students' perspective

When a trusting relationship had developed, students reported that they felt safe and accepted by the counsellor. Students felt that the counsellor genuinely cared about them and was not simply doing a job. Having a person who listened was valuable because it was unusual. Student Y said, “some students don't have many people to talk to. Sometimes their issues, they can't tell their parents, or teachers or friends about it, so you can tell your counsellors.” Students felt that the counsellor cared about them because they were listened to, and it felt good to talk to a trustworthy person about them, as Student J explained: “sometimes when you have some feelings, some emotions, but if you hide it inside your deep heart, you will be so hard to live with it. When I express it, I feel much better.”

Students felt that the counsellor did not judge them, unlike other people they might talk to, and felt that they were accepted and treated as people, not “like a puzzle to be solved” as Student A put it, unlike other people in their life, as Student Q explained:

I feel much more better to have someone to talk to because if you tell your friends about your feelings or problems, they would easily judge you, but if it's a counsellor then it's going to be different because they're very trustable and they understand you, that's why.

Students felt that the counsellor understood their perspective and the counsellor's empathy was communicated to students. Student L said, "It's like she knows what I think ... Every time, when I came in, she can know that I'm happy or sad" and Student V said, "I think the counsellor know what I'm thinking, understand what I'm thinking." Student P said, "she talks about how she understands the situation. She rephrases the whole thing and makes me feel comfortable because it makes me feel like she really gets me." A small number of students said that the counsellor being too accepting was not helpful since it kept them from being independent and solving their own problems.

4.5.3.2 The counsellors' perspective

The counsellors emphasised the importance of developing a caring relationship and were clear that they thought the relationship was necessary for change to occur. The relationship students had with the counsellor was particularly important since students did not have other good relationships in school. Counsellors said that talking to the counsellor was important because the students did not have anyone else to talk to, as Counsellor E explained:

Some of the kids don't even get a chance to talk to an adult in their usual life. They can't even have that with the teachers because with the teachers it's like giving orders and teaching most of the time, and the parents were away. So I'm the only ... adult they can talk to. So I think for counselling with kids ... can make quite a big change for them and it can mean quite significantly in their life.

Counsellors identified two main components of the counselling relationship: feeling accepted and cared for by the counsellor and having someone who listens and understands. Not judging students was mentioned by several counsellors as an important component of students feeling cared for. Counsellor D thought that "they do find it useful that they can say literally anything and you either won't be shocked or judgmental about it," and Counsellor C said that, "they can talk to me about anything they like and I think they know that ... They know that with me, they can say what they want."

All the counsellors were explicit in their view that listening to students' problems was a key role of a school counsellor and that students valued being able to talk to someone more highly than they valued other aspects of the counselling relationship. Counsellor A said that "the majority of students are looking for somebody to talk to, not necessarily to receive anything" and that students wanted "somebody to offload all their stuff onto." She went on to say that this "really is, I would say, the main focus of a school counsellor." Counsellor C described working with one student and trying to "figure out what is it that she needs" and realising that "she just wants someone to listen to her, that's all she wants."

4.6 Theme 4. “She may regard me as her shelter”: An ongoing but limited source of support

The central organising concept of this theme is that the close, informal relationship which developed between a counsellor and a student often became a source of long-term, ongoing emotional support which is limited by the context and nature of school counselling.

Students described their counsellor as a “safety net” which they perceived as helpful but which could also foster dependency on the counsellor. This relationship was made possible in the context of the school setting where counsellors and students had the opportunity for close and frequent contact. The school setting also limited the helpfulness of school counselling. Both students and counsellors spoke extensively about the ongoing support which counselling provided, students being more positive in their comments than counsellors. Both students and counsellors recognised the limitations of school counselling. While students spoke more about concerns related to confidentiality and role confusion, counsellors focused on time constraints and logistical problems in seeing students. This theme has three subthemes.

4.6.1 Subtheme 1. A safety net for students

4.6.1.1 The students' perspective

As a result of their personal experience of counselling, students said that they were glad the school had a counselling service which was convenient and accessible. Counselling became embedded as a part of the student's school experience and become less formal over time. Many students described this ongoing source of emotional support as something of a "safety net" for them. Students felt that building a relationship enabled the counsellor to be a source of ongoing emotional support for them. Student A said she started "relying on them, not fully relying but also using them as a form of support and help and also just to talk about it a lot." Several students described how they would keep going back to the counsellor when they experienced emotional problems: Student O said, "I know that in a sense I became dependent on these sessions. But at the same time that gave me a sense of relief."

Students felt they were able to go back whenever they needed support. Student P felt that the counsellor was always available: "I feel like if I ever need help again, I would obviously go to a counsellor, yes." For student U, counselling had ended but he felt he could go back any time: "Maybe if I face something that I can't make decisions or don't know what to do, I might find her again."

Students reported that they liked the flexibility of counselling in their schools. Student E said, "I think being able to fit counselling into a schedule at school was very helpful," and

Student A appreciated being able to attend counselling whenever she needed to without having to make a formal arrangement: “I didn’t feel like I was obliged to book a session because I just go in whenever I feel like it now.”

Students appreciated that the counsellor was concerned about them outside the counselling sessions. Student A spoke about how important it was that the counsellor had made contact with her over a weekend:

Even over a weekend, she was trying to contact me. We were contacting through email because she was trying to check up on me and make sure that I’m not doing anything stupid to myself or anything like that.

Some students felt they may be “too reliant” (Student G) or “too dependent” (Student Y) on the counsellor. Student Q said, “I don’t want to be there forever because I feel like if I keep going to counselling, I would feel like I’m not relying on myself anymore.”

4.6.1.2 The counsellors’ perspective

Counsellors thought that, to students, having a relationship with the counsellor was more important than any therapeutic effect of counselling. Students valued their sessions with counsellors, and counsellors felt that students saw them as caring individuals. Counsellor A thought that students saw their counsellor as “somebody who will see their side and empathise

with them, somebody outside the academic, high-pressure learning environment that we have, actually cares what happens to them.”

Several counsellors said that their role was somewhat like that of a parent. Counsellor F described his role as “filling in the gap that the parents or the teachers cannot fulfil” and Counsellor A said that, because “there’s no mum, there’s no dad in the roles of mum and dad, there’s just nobody, and they’re very much left on their own.” Counsellors felt that, despite the closeness of their relationships with students and the way students might see them as fulfilling some parental roles, students understood that the relationship was professional, even when they had a very long and well-established relationship with the counsellor. Counsellor C, for example, said that one of her students felt he could contact her on weekends and during holidays but that “he knows not to cross the line either.”

Counsellors saw themselves as “another layer of support” (Counsellor A) for students, and Counsellor G explained that availability was an important dimension of this support.

Counsellors were flexible about the length of a counselling relationship and students knew and appreciated this. Counsellors felt, however, that they provided a long-term source of support for many students. The most salient element of this theme is the idea of counselling as a “shelter” or a “safety net.” Most of the counsellors said that students often came to see them as a long-term, ongoing source of support and that students were often keen to keep coming back to counselling. Counsellor A said that many students “find it incredibly helpful and they use the counsellors as their safety net,” and Counsellor B said she thought that one of her clients “may regard me as her shelter.” When asked about students terminating counselling, Counsellor C said, “I haven’t had

one, because they keep coming back,” and Counsellor G said of students, “I think they’re all keen to come back ... they do want to come back.”

Counsellors said that long-term support was sometimes necessary and beneficial. Counsellor D said, “I do know that there are some students who probably need constant checking in. Maybe over the over a whole year or even longer, depending on how their situation is. If that’s what they need, maybe that’s what we should be providing.” Counsellors also felt, however, that students should be able to use counselling as short-term support which enabled them to develop the capacity to “fly solo.” Counsellor D thought that self-management was “the ultimate goal of it, because we are not gonna be around and they’re not gonna be around ad infinitum. So we do try to work towards some self-care in the end.”

Counsellors were also very aware of the negative effects of long-term counselling such as creating dependency. Several counsellors spoke about this in terms of counselling becoming a “crutch” or a “place to hide.” Counsellor B said that she might “keep distance from those students ... because I don’t want to still be the shelter.” Counsellor C thought that “I’ve become a crutch to them, I’m not sure. Anyway, they’re the ones who made the choice to continue coming back. I always even try – I try to terminate some of these in the past, but they keep coming back.” Counsellor E expressed his fear that depending on a counsellor would create dependency: “I do think the perfect situation, the ideal situation of internal strength and everything should not just be because you have somewhere to hide or let’s say some safe place for you to hide.”

4.6.2 Subtheme 2. The limitations of school counselling

4.6.2.1 The students' perspective

Students reported several factors which they thought limited the helpfulness of school counselling.

First, some students had ongoing concerns about confidentiality and they felt that this limited what they could disclose to the counsellor. Student B thought that counselling was limited by a lack of confidentiality because, “if you have a counsellor in the school, there is a pretty big chance that one secret or something would come out, something that you never wanted to tell anyone.” She went on to say that, because of this, “in-school counselling ... can only help so much.” Student O said that her counsellor had broken confidentiality and that she felt “violated” and did not want to go to counselling any more: “I didn’t really trust her any more.”

Second, counsellors having dual roles in school was also associated with concerns about confidentiality, which meant that certain issues could never be raised because there was a limit to the amount of trust a student could feel towards the counsellor. Student B described how she was reluctant to disclose too much because the counsellor might behave differently when they were acting in another role, for example.

Third, the counsellor being in school was described by some students as being “awkward” (Students B and M) and embarrassing.

Fourth, some students were confused about the nature of their relationship with the counsellor, which they described as not being quite the same as that with a friend and that there was hence a limit to how close they could become. Student Y expressed her confusion rather clearly:

There's still a limit – because I know that [counsellors], they don't want us to be friends. We can't have their personal Facebook or number. There's still a limit to that. Sometimes I do feel weird. Sometimes we talk as if we're friends, but still we're not actually friends, and sometimes that feels a bit weird. I'm not too sure like, what's this relationship? Is it friends? Is it a relationship between an agent and a client? That's confusing.

Fifth, some students reported that their parents did not like them going to counselling and that they had to hide it from their parents. Student X said that her mother “doesn't like me telling too much about our family to other people” and that this made her feel “not so good about going to the counsellor.” Student Y said that she liked counselling, but she had to hide it from her father because he thought counselling was for “losers” and that attending counselling would have a negative impact on her grades: “That's the downside because I really can't tell my parents about it. Sometimes I have to be sneaky about it.”

Because of these concerns, students felt that some problems were beyond the scope of school counselling. Student B summarised what she felt was the limit of what school counselling could achieve: “I feel like school counselling, the best you can do is just be a place for a student to be

in a rant or come to terms with something. It can't really solve the problem." Some students thought that the effects of counselling did not last. Student F thought that "it worked quite well at first but honestly speaking, it kind of fade out," and Student K felt that "none of his advice that came from him as a counsellor's perspective really stuck to me for a long-term time. It was more short-term."

Practical constraints also limited what counselling could do from the students' perspective: a lack of flexibility about appointments, a lack of time for counselling and conflicts with the school schedule. Students said that the counsellor was very busy and that this made it difficult to make an appointment. Scheduling difficulties and conflicts with classes and other activities also made it hard to meet the counsellor. Some students felt that counselling caused them to miss schoolwork and that this could be a negative thing.

4.6.2.2 The counsellors' perspective

Counsellors felt that students were concerned about confidentiality and that they were "ashamed," "terrified" and "worried" (Counsellors G and H) about information getting back to other people such as parents and friends

Counsellors felt that students sometimes picked up the attitude that speaking to a counsellor is not a good thing from parents' reactions to finding out their child is meeting a counsellor.

Counsellor B attributed this parental attitude to Chinese culture where "the bad things about the

family should not be disclosed to other people: it is quite firm in the mind ... I cannot say all of them but, yes, quite a number of them, they have this firm belief.”

Counsellors felt that having dual or multiple roles in the school had a downside. Counsellor D said that there was a conflict between the way she had to behave in class and the way she wanted to interact with students as a counsellor. Counsellor C felt that having dual roles in school sometimes made it harder for students to trust the counsellor, and Counsellor E expressed similar concerns about the problems of counsellors having dual roles: “I do think like people in our school wearing many different hats for those counsellors, it’s quite an issue actually for people to feel comfortable.” Counsellor G also felt that, because of her dual roles in the school, students were “less willing to share.” Counsellor C felt that having dual roles in school sometimes made it harder for students to trust the counsellor: “How do the kids see you then? No wonder they think we all speak to each other because we have so many hats.”

The structure of the school’s schedule and the culture of academic lessons being the focus of school life made it difficult to get access to students. Counsellors also thought that, even when students had free time, their academic work took priority. Counsellor G felt that, even with the support of teachers, the focus on academic work made it hard to arrange counselling sessions: counselling was, she said, “secondary to classes. The students can come see me if there’s no assessment” and that “assessments get in the way,” and also felt that, even with the support of teachers, the focus on academic work made it hard to arrange counselling sessions: “one teacher really values counselling and he says, ‘You know you can take her anytime except she really

missed her class beginning of this week and I really need her here this week so it's important cos they have assessments coming up.'"

The administrative burden of arranging meetings in class time took time away from meeting with students. The system created uncertainty for the student since "I couldn't take them out of the same class every week and I had to move them around" (Counsellor G). Seeing students only relatively infrequently put a limit on what counselling could achieve.

Counsellor C summarised her frustrations at having to move sessions around to accommodate the school schedule, and at not having sufficiently long or frequent sessions:

You can't meet them at the same time every week unless you do it on a lunch break or after school. There are so many different commitments with the kid doing their own ... activities or you doing ... activities or you have meetings or whatever, it is that by the time you actually meet them over lunch break it's like half an hour. I never feel like that's long enough ... I do find that really – because then you're like, 'Oh God. That was 20 minutes. I'll just see you next week then.' It's like, 'Damn it! Next week?' So many things could have happened by then. I mean we make do and I always run over.

4.6.3 Subtheme 3. Counselling is not helping

4.6.3.1 The students' perspective

A few students thought that counselling did not help much, though they did not see counselling as a bad thing. Student E felt that “I definitely don’t think that counselling is a bad thing but I also don’t think that counselling is perfect and it shouldn’t be viewed as the perfect solution” and Student K said that, “for me, counselling didn’t change my life much at all. Not negative in a way but, it didn’t help me that much.”

A small number of students reported certain aspects of their counselling experience which were not helpful: feeling judged, the counsellor making assumptions about the student, a poor match between student and counsellor, and language as a barrier to understanding, were all mentioned as factors inhibiting the development of a close, trusting relationship between the student and the counsellor. Some students were worried about being judged by the counsellor, and a few students felt that they were not understood by the counsellor or that the counsellor was seeing things from their own frame of reference and not giving a voice to the student. Student R said, “... they want to try to explain all the thing by their own experience. But it’s not my story.” Advice giving was not helpful: “Every time she gave me advice and I don’t find it helpful” (Student L). Language could be a barrier which inhibited communication because, as Student N explained, “Because the students are unable to find the words, find the correct way to express their emotion, express their problem.”

Students reported that counselling could be intense, difficult or overwhelming and, while this did not always inhibit change, it was not seen as a positive thing. Student B expressed the difficulties she had at the start of her counselling experience:

[I]t was just really overwhelming ... It was huge. On the first term, usually, every single counselling session would have me crying because it was just nerve-wracking to talk about something that was, one, disturbing me, and two, do something that I was not comfortable with.

One student said that counselling was helpful but that it comes at a cost, namely concerns about confidentiality and the worry this brings. "...counselling removes one's worry. But it adds so much more about your confidentiality, how other people think of you" (Student B). Students reported that some things are too personal to disclose and felt that they would never be able to disclose their thoughts and feelings fully to the counsellor. Student J said "I don't tell them everything" because some problems are "too deep" and "with these problems, they can't help us." Student Q said that some things "are better just unsaid."

4.6.3.2 The counsellors' perspective

Counsellors thought that some students had a negative experience of counselling, though these students were a small minority. Counsellor A said that there were "very few who refuse to go again" and that a small number of students "will not take help and support

from anybody.” Counsellor F was unsure that counselling made a difference in some cases and that problems may resolve naturally: “I actually can’t tell if this helped by counselling or not, or just because they are just getting more mature.”

Counsellor B thought that students found it difficult to say negative things about themselves and that this might impede counselling: “they feel when talking to people, they need to say something positive; they cannot say anything negative, but actually in a counselling session, you can tell me, that, for example, you feel not comfortable.”

Counsellor D said that change in counselling was often slow and that “it does depend on the student” and that older students found it harder to make changes than younger ones because “they’ve all been in a sort of a habit, a cycle, and it’s hard for them to accept thinking in a different way is going to help them.” Counsellor B thought that counselling might not be very impactful because “there are many things happening in their lives, their peers, their family, in the society or in the school. I think this is only a small part of that.”

Counsellor F noted that counsellors could occasionally cause problems by not being sensitive to the wider context of a student’s situation. She gave an example of having made a student’s situation worse by not being fully aware of what was happening in the student’s family and therefore not anticipating the parents’ reaction to what she had suggested the student might do.

4.7 Summary

The four themes which make up the *relationship in context* thematic domain describe the way in which counselling is embedded in the life of the school, the barriers which students experience as they contemplate and approach counselling, the importance of building a counselling relationship, and the consequences of this relationship. Each of these themes constitutes part of the macro-process of students engaging in counselling. The central organising concept of the *relationship in context* thematic domain is that the sociocultural context and the school setting in which counselling occurs have a significant impact on the process of relationship building and the consequences of the relationship which develops. Students' fears related to attending counselling are heightened by fears about confidentiality and the multiple roles of counsellors, and also by sociocultural factors including feelings of shame associated with revealing personal information outside the family and the stigma associated with mental health issues. These fears could be at least partially overcome by the building of a close relationship with the counsellor based on trust and which was characterised by equality, acceptance and empathy. This relationship acted as a significant source of social and emotional support for students, but counsellors emphasised the potential for a dependent relationship to develop.

Chapter 5. Findings: Change processes

5.1 Overview

The second thematic domain developed from the data was labelled *change processes*, and this chapter presents the findings associated with this thematic domain. Three change processes were identified: new ways of thinking; developing better relationships; and experiencing positive emotions and increasing self-efficacy. These processes are overlapping and often take place concurrently during counselling.

5.2 Introduction

The *relationship in context* thematic domain described in Chapter 4 captures the embeddedness of counselling into the school's organisation and the wider sociocultural context and explores the ways in which these contexts influence students' and counsellors' experience of counselling. Hence, this thematic domain describes the macro-process of students engaging in counselling. The second thematic domain has been labelled *change processes* and is described in this chapter.

The central organising concept of the *change processes* thematic domain is that, in the context of a strong and stable relationship with their counsellor, students experience therapeutic change processes which have a significant positive impact on their experience of school and home life.

There are three change processes under this thematic domain, as follows:

Table 5.1. Thematic domain: Change processes

Central organising concept: In the context of a strong and stable relationship with their counsellor, students experience change processes which have a significant positive impact on their experience of school and home life.

Process	Central organising concept	Representative quotation
New ways of thinking	Acting as an objective and experienced facilitator, the counsellor helped students to explore their ways of thinking. On reflection, students developed insight into their thought processes and more realistic ways of thinking, leading to feelings of optimism and greater resourcefulness.	‘The most important thing is the insight’ (Student F)
Developing better relationships	Acting as a facilitator, the counsellor helped students to practise communication skills, develop empathy and explore the nature of relationships. As a result, students became more confident in communicating and developed insight into their relationships. They became more assertive, developed self-advocacy and valued their relationships more.	‘I’ve been able to connect with more people’ (Student A)
Experiencing positive emotions and increasing self-efficacy	As a result of the counsellor’s warm, accepting and empathetic attitude, students felt better during counselling and this led to greater emotional stability. This in turn enabled students to have a better experience of school and manage their academic work more effectively.	‘I guess I feel better about myself’ (Student Y)

- Process 1. “The most important thing is the insight”: New ways of thinking
- Process 2. “I’ve been able to connect with more people”: Developing better relationships
- Process 3. “I guess I feel better about myself”: Experiencing positive emotions and increasing self-efficacy

These processes are summarised in Table 5.1.

Each process has several components which are identified by students and counsellors. Taken together, the perspectives of students and counsellors enable a comprehensive picture of each change process to be developed. Each process will be considered in turn.

5.3 Process 1. “The most important thing is the insight”: New ways of thinking

5.3.1 The counsellor as a facilitator

Students reported that the role of the counsellor was central in helping them to develop insight or gain new perspectives. The counsellor asked questions which encouraged them to think about their problems differently. Student A said that her counsellor would give “a very objective comment” on problems, and Student J thought that a “third party ... someone outside of it can understand better.”

Students found that talking to the counsellor was more useful than talking to family members or friends due to the counsellor's independence and objectivity. Student H thought that her family gave her "negative advice" whereas the counsellor tended to "encourage me."

Student P attributed her ability to see things differently directly to the counsellor giving her a different way of thinking about things: "She told me to focus on myself because if I couldn't solve the problem by myself, then there's no use in wasting my time and trying to solve it even more because of how it's affecting me. So I did what she advised me to do."

Most students reported that the counsellor was not very directive and did not give advice or an opinion but gave students an opportunity to explore things in different ways. Student C, for example, said that her counsellor:

... didn't really suggest solutions, I don't think she's supposed to, but she helped me to see my issue from another third person's perspective. It helped me be more open about and not be stuck on my perspective of the issue.

Students experienced the counsellor as an objective person with greater life experience. Students said that it was sometimes helpful for the counsellor to share his own experience and they appreciated the counsellor being older. Student M thought that the "counsellor's experience ... can help you give a better picture on how you can make your own path to the future." Student X said that the counsellor "talked about how he went through when he was at my age, and always giving me different solutions to deal with my problems step by

step,” and “he has good experience that he can tell me which way is the right way and which way is the wrong way.”

Sometimes the counsellor gave more direct suggestions which students found helpful. Student J, for example, said “I was so sad about my family problems and he gave me some ideas of ... what can I do to improve.”

All of the counsellors thought that insight came from the student and that the counsellor acted as a facilitator or a guide in the process. Counsellor B noted that “they get the insights during the process and it has come from them” and that “they may get another perspective that they may think useful,” and Counsellor A also spoke about how the student already had “their own solution,” and described the role of the counsellor as facilitator in this process:

They’re seeking somebody to discuss things with and think them through, you know, the guided question, the ‘have you thought about ...?’ and ‘what about ...?’ and letting them express really what their own solutions are. Most of our students have their own solutions.

Counsellors used a variety of metaphors to describe the process of guiding a student in counselling. Counsellor B expressed the same idea using the analogy of a companion on a journey who will “walk with you for a while,” and said that she thought “counselling is not about advice giving ... they may feel safe and they can be more open and they can explore themselves. Then they get the insights during the process and it has come from them.” Counsellor C

described the process as “helping them to really unpick or unpack the jumbled mess of thoughts, feelings, emotions, whatever it is that’s going on in their minds.” The counsellor’s role in this, according to Counsellor D, was to “ask the right questions” in order for the “penny to drop,” and she called this “powerful stuff.” Counsellor F described the process as “packing luggage” in order to make things “more manageable and easier” for the student. Counsellor E thought that the role of the counsellor was to increase the student’s self-awareness to a point where they could gain insight on their own. Counsellor G described the role of counsellors as “catalysts” who speeded up a change that would have happened anyway. Counsellors still thought, however, that the process of developing insight could take a long time. Several counsellors said that counselling could take more than a year to bring about insight, and Counsellor C used the analogy of planting and watering a seed and having to wait for it to germinate and grow. Counsellors facilitated the process of students developing greater self-acceptance, self-confidence and the ability to problem-solve for themselves. Counsellor H described the way she facilitated students to problem-solve by helping them to “think about the problem, how the problem affects them, the effect of the problem or the impact on them. I will also invite them to think about any method, any solutions,” and Counsellor D described a similar process:

“I would ask them what they’ve tried and what hasn’t worked, and then ask them what they think they would like to see changed and how they might be able to come up with a different solution.”

5.3.2 Being reflective in response to the counsellor leading to insight

One of the ways in which students were able to develop new perspectives was through responding to the counsellor's questions which, in turn, encouraged students to ask questions of themselves. Student A described the way her counsellor helped her to think for herself: "I feel like, the thing that she does is raise questions to me which I would then consider. It's really helpful." Student C linked the counsellor's questions directly to gaining a new perspective as a result of being encouraged to articulate her thinking process in the session:

She asked me why I think the super, super negative stuff outcomes. When I'm explaining it, I find that I'm being unrealistic, and it helped. I'm not sure if that was the intention, but if it was, it worked because I can see in another perspective.

This was an ongoing process. Most students did not explicitly describe an 'aha' moment but seemed to think that new insights were gained over time and by engagement with counselling. As a result of the interaction between student and counsellor, students were able to gain new insights into their problems by a reappraisal of their experiences and develop new ways of thinking about these experiences, and the development of a different perspective helped students to feel better. As well as helping them to look at things differently, counselling also helped them to clarify what was important. Student A said, for example, "they made me realise what's the point of actually feeling sad. Also there are many more great things in life as well." Student C thought that talking to the counsellor "wasn't an immediate solution, but throughout the

experience, it helped me become stronger, more emotionally stable because, I could think about it in another way; be more positive... I definitely learned how to change my thinking.”

Students valued this aspect of counselling and saw it as having made an important contribution to their lives. Student F, for example, thought that “the most important thing is the insight. That’s very, very fundamental – it’s like a foundation of counselling.”

One of the key insights students gained was a more realistic view of their situation. This involved an explicit reappraisal of a student’s thought processes. Student N, for example, described how he became more realistic by realising that there was no evidence for his negative appraisal of the situation: “There’s no evidence saying that I failed at all. You just keep thinking it and keep worrying about it, which is not true.” Students were able to think in a more positive or optimistic way as a result of this reappraisal process. Students said that counselling helped them to “think in a different mindset” (Student C), “have hope in my mind” (Student D) and “understand the important things in my life and what I should do to feel positive” (Student G). Students were able to use the insights they had gained through counselling to become more accepting of their experience and face their problems in a more positive way which, in turn, led to better emotional regulation. Student B said that counselling “made you feel like it was okay to have problems, and it wasn’t such a big thing, or such a burden.” Student B also reported that “counselling did help me realise that there is no normal, that the definition of normal should be decided by me and not by anyone else” and that this realisation was “really helpful because it helped me with facing a lot of my problems.”

Counsellors felt that counselling enabled students to find insights which could be transformative. Counsellors felt that insight came from a process of self-exploration that was guided by the counsellor. When students gained insight, they could be “transformed.” In the words of Counsellor C: “eventually they come to their own realisation of whatever it is, then they transform.” This “transformation,” as explained by counsellor C, was noticed by parents:

And some of the students that – I was not in contact with their parents beforehand, and they had a few sessions with me, and afterwards, the parents called me back, said, ‘My kid is transforming.’

5.3.3 Becoming more resourceful

Students were able to consciously transfer the insights gained through counselling to their life. Student P said that she always “went back to her [the counsellor’s] suggestion” to “focus on making myself happier before making other people happy,” and Student Q thought it was helpful to “remember what your counsellor said” so that it would be “easier for you to think and decide what you need to do.” Students felt able to accept their problems more instead of struggling with them. Student G reported a greater sense of self-reliance and said that she could “make myself happy,” and Student S said that she was able to stand up for herself in relationships and focus more on herself: “I try to care more about myself, like when people try to upset me and I know that I shouldn’t be upset because of them.”

Students reported that thinking about problems in new ways made them more open. Student P felt that she was now “more open to new options and suggestions of how to deal with the situation” and that she wanted to “focus on myself and my mental health before revisiting the situation.” Student N thought that “more realistic thinking” had “made my life better.”

Counsellors felt that developing insight was beneficial for students in a number of ways. Becoming more aware of their own psychological processes and learning to become resourceful and confident in their own abilities was a key process, described powerfully by Counsellor E:

They don't really know about themselves, and they are not aware of how important knowing themselves is ... Are you aware that you're the kind of person that you came with these emotions, this stuff? Is that normal to be like that? In their mind I'd say they are not aware of that. So they don't need solution particularly for that, they just have to be aware of that ... So I do think they can handle most of their problems. And if they can't handle their problems, probably I can't as well, cos they are probably the most powerful and resourceful person in their life.

Counsellor H also expressed the view that the development of insight into their own psychological processes meant that students “will feel they have the confidence to handle the problems first, because maybe they have the awareness to understand [themselves].” Counsellor D spoke about students increasing their “repertoire of possibilities” as a result of thinking deeply about a situation. Counsellor D went on to speak about students being able to take more responsibility in their lives as a result of gaining insight by being “responsible for their own

paths in a lot of ways.” Counsellor C described how developing insight led to greater happiness for one student: “She is starting to really see how her own behaviours are impeding her progress to be happy, that’s incredible.” Counsellor D also spoke about students changing their behaviour as a result of gaining insight into the way they were using their time and energy: “they can start to realise their energies could be better spent doing something else. And it would actually be more fulfilling for them to not be sucked into these cycles of things that they can’t really control.”

Counsellors felt that the new insights students achieved as a result of counselling would be useful in the future. Counsellor D described students realising they have a greater locus of control as “quite empowering for them,” and Counsellor B thought that insight constituted a useful “skill:”

Somehow they get some skills, somehow they get a perspective or an attitude about themselves, about life, and about their environment that they may feel useful later in their lives or may help them to cope better in this world when they can go away from their family.

5.4 Process 2. “I’ve been able to connect with more people”: Developing better relationships

5.4.1 Developing empathy

Through counselling, students were able to develop empathy for other people. Student E summarised the way counselling had made a difference to her by saying that “I’m able to live, I think, as a more attentive and empathetic person. People can find it easier to speak to me now because I’m not always thinking about my problems,” and developing empathy made a difference in her experience as a student leader at the school, “because I was able to accept people’s mistakes a lot easier. I was able to help them work through it instead of thinking why would you do this?” Student F felt that counselling had enabled him to be less judgemental about other people and said that “I’ll make a judgement of him just right on the spot I’m really stubborn in my attitude, I would say someone who is very superficial before the counselling which now I have changed.”

Empathy had an impact on students’ perception of teachers and parents. Student N reported that, as a result of counselling, “I just realised that teachers are just like us. They have their own community ... It helped me a lot in my perceptions of things,” and Student J said that “I used to argue with my parents every week but after counselling, I know how to think in the way my parents feel.” A better understanding of other people also allowed students to change their expectations of them. Student S said, “Maybe I should not expect too much, like my parents should treat me better. It’s too impossible. So I should not expect

something like that.” Students developed insight into how their behaviour affected other people. Student R said that counselling allowed her to “see things in different sides,” and Student H said she was able to see “how bad my temper is to other people.”

Developing a better understanding of other people enabled students to develop closer relationships. Students thought that counselling had enabled them to connect with friends by listening more and understanding their perspective. Student S said of her friends that “We understand each other more maybe, when my friends are not happy, I will ask them if they want to tell me what happened and then try to help them.” Student V expressed a similar view: “Maybe some friends, or classmates have some emotional problems and I can also calm them or help them and try to talk with them.”

Students thought that counselling had improved their family relationships by helping them to empathise more with their family members. Student J said that “I used to argue with my parents every week but after counselling, I know how to ... think in the way my parents feel, and then I know that they’re for my good,” and Student U reported that “she [the counsellor] teach me to listen to my family and this means my relationship with my family is improved.”

Many other students reported that counselling had had a positive effect on their family relationships. Student C said that counselling “helped me be more open to people, especially my family,” and Student Q said that, after counselling, “I feel I’m more open to my parents ... I wasn’t able to tell my parents anything, like my feelings and emotions. But after I went through counselling, it was more easier for me to tell my parents.” Student R said that “Now me and my

family are more closer and I can feel they love me,” and Student P said she trusted her parents more and that “by opening up to them and trusting them and having this stronger relationship, it allows me to feel more safe in the ... with my family.” Student A said that she felt she was open to talking to her family:

Before I really just isolated myself. Every time I get home I would just shut the doors and went to my room and let myself be. Now, they would actively approach me and I feel it’s a much more connected family. Also, I let them know more about how I felt and I’d tell them anything that’s really on my mind.

The counsellor facilitated students to explore the nature of their friendships and make some changes in the way they approached these relationships such as valuing friendships more or being more assertive in their interactions with friends. Student W said that friendships had become more of a priority for him: “At this moment, I’ve focused a lot on friendships. I care about my friends. I really want to have more and more friends.” Student A explained how her counsellor helped her to examine the “toxic” nature of her friendships and think differently about them:

I’ve been thinking differently. Before, I had really competitive friendships and it was very toxic, but I kept thinking, ‘If they are my friends anyways then why would I have to do that?’ That’s something the counsellor made me think.

Counsellors thought that students were able to experience better relationships as a result of developing insight into the way relationships developed and into their own role in relationships. Counsellor A, for example, thought that it was “powerful” for students to realise that “people do change as they grow, and sometimes they grow apart and sometimes they grow together,” and Counsellor H said that it was important that students understood themselves better since, “when he knows that something is their own maybe attitudes or problem, it’s more easy to handle the peer relationship.”

Counsellor G described how bringing in parents and working with students and parents together could lead to the development of insight into the ways different family members were thinking which could improve the relationship:

[M]any students think their parents will love them unless they don’t do well in school. But when the parents come in and we address that particular point, the parents will usually say ‘I love you no matter what’ but the child doesn’t didn’t understand that previously ... When the parents come in, we teach very positive coping mechanisms for the whole entire family. And there are cases where the whole that their dynamics change very positively because they’ve seen us.

Counsellor A summarised the way she felt counselling could be transformative for a family:

For some kids the entire dynamics of a family can change. That could not be more significant ... The whole idea that the parents and the children will actually talk to each other is amazing. It's revolutionary within their lives.

5.4.2 Communication: Developing more confidence and better social skills

Counselling seems to have provided a safe and non-judgemental environment where students were able to talk and gain some confidence in their ability to communicate. This enabled students to become more confident when speaking to people outside counselling.

Student Y said that counselling “helps me talk to people more confidently,” because “I have more chance to communicate with people because of counselling, so it helps with me communicating with people because I really don't talk much to people.” Student F said that

there was this period when I'm quite anxious with strangers and people that I've never met before. From time to time, the counselling session does help me with speaking to a stranger as well as meeting new friends, talking to new people, these are the more long-lasting changes.

Student B was clear that talking in counselling led directly to her improved confidence in talking to other people. She said that

I was going to counselling because it was helping me feel better. But it also helped me be able to talk to someone without getting all scared. Because I got to ramble, I got to babble on about things ... That whole thing just made me have a bit more practice and catch up ... on speaking to people and interacting.

Student D said, “counselling actually train my communication skills because I was always afraid of what people think about me.” Student M reported that “When I went to counselling, I increasingly got better with my social skills,” and Student Y said that “it kind of trains me to know how to talk to people because when I was the person I was in 2015, I didn’t really know how to communicate.” Student Q summarised how counselling had helped her to develop better social skills:

I used to be inside a very tiny bubble, but after counselling and after they gave me a lot of ideas and thoughts, my bubble has grown bigger. So, I’m more social. I can be more social.

Practising communication in counselling led to greater confidence in communicating with other people. Student I said that counselling “made me more confident and more outgoing so I talked with my friends more,” and Student T said that it had enabled her to “build up more confidence to face people.” Student X summarised his experience by saying:

Most importantly, he made me gain a lot of confidence in myself, so I started to become a normal person and building stronger and more reliable relationship with other people such as my friends nowadays and stuff.

Student B said that, after counselling, she had been “talking a lot more comfortably,” and went on to explain the difference this has made to her social interactions:

Usually, if even if I’m hanging out with friends outside of my school, I’m very quiet. I’m holding up my phone or reading a book or I just sit there and listen and eat my food or something. Even now, whenever I’m speaking, I’m less scared to speak. I’m a lot more – I’m having a conversation type.

Student M said that she was able to engage more in social “risk-taking,” and said that “I’m able to easily interact with more people and I won’t get so nervous.” Student Q said that, “after talking to a counsellor, it’s like I was able to trust more people, and I was able to – I was more confident about speaking out.”

Students felt that increased confidence with communication had a direct impact on their relationships and made them more open. Student B said that

Along with opening up in counselling, I also opened up to my friends a lot more, and my family where I was a little more comfortable with telling them stuff than before counselling I was like, ‘It doesn’t matter’ or ‘it’s not worth it.’

Student S said she felt more able to be herself in her interactions with others: “I think it makes me feel more comfortable in building up relationship with friends and family. I can really show the weak side of myself.”

Students felt that they were better able to connect with people after counselling. Student I said that after counselling, “I talked to my friends more and I made more friends.” Student Y also said, “I’m more friendly and I know how to make friends.” Student A said that counselling enabled her to feel closer to people by giving her a “new approach,” meaning that she had been “able to connect with more people. By meeting with them, really my first time opening up with people, I felt like I could really open up to more, also. That’s been a big change.”

Counsellors emphasised the importance of the role of communication in counselling, and how developing communication skills in counselling could help students to build better relationships, as Counsellor D described very explicitly:

Counselling is a very is very strong on communication. It’s very strong on showing somebody how to listen properly. It’s very strong on clarifying what you mean and what you’re saying and what you’re telling me. That if a student has a lot of that, if they can develop those skills just generally in their relationships and communication, they’ll probably find that their relationships naturally improve, I would say, because a lot of relationship issues are based on negative assumptions about things ... So if they can even just understand good communication naturally, some of their relationships might improve: how to talk to people and how to listen

... I've done the role plays with some of the younger students. We've talked about facial expressions and, 'If I act in a certain way, how do you feel now?' So they've started to consider verbal, nonverbal communication and to actually understand what somebody is trying to say to them and what they're saying. So improved communication already can improve relationships.

5.4.3 Contact with parents

In a small number of cases, counsellors had direct contact with parents, and the students considered this to be helpful. Student R described how "the [counsellor] will tell my mother or father what I think and what I need sometimes. So my parents know more about me and help me in daily life."

Student A described how the counsellor told her mother "how I felt about feeling so away from my family and how it's such a superficial relationship." Her mother "really understood and then she also noticed that." As a result of this interaction, "We were both trying to change it and I let my guard down, just tried to converse with her normally, as I would with any other person, and that changed quite a lot."

Counsellors thought it was sometimes helpful to include parents in counselling or mediation with the student in order to more fully address a problem. By including parents, counsellors thought that problems could be addressed more deeply and that communication between

parents and students could improve. Counsellor F felt that, “if you’re working with the kids, you can’t ignore the parents. You have to involve them in the process,” and that “if they understand each other more then it’s more easy for them to continue the communication.”

Counsellor H expressed the view that it was important to involve parents because “some of the problem of the student does not only come from school but also comes from the parents because of their expectation.” Counsellor G thought that, “if we’re able to get the parents in, we can discuss more openly and hopefully, there’ll be some sort of positive change in the family dynamics.” Mediation between the parent and student was helpful because the perspectives of the two parties were often so different and it is helpful for the counsellor to build a fuller picture of the family dynamic, as Counsellor D explained:

I think it’s or I think it’s interesting when you get one side of the situation from the student and then you meet the parent separately and get their version. I can think of a couple of parents that I’ve dealt with recently where that’s happened. And the parent perspective is almost 180-degree opposite to the student’s perspective ... If you can build a fuller picture and see the dynamics the family interactions ... sometimes that’s probably what’s needed to bring it all together.

Counsellors emphasised the importance of obtaining students’ consent before contacting parents. Counsellor E said that, “Ninety-nine percent of my contact with the parents, I got the consent of the students beforehand. I never tell a word to parents when I talk to them before I’ve reached the kids,” and Counsellor A added that, “wherever possible, the counsellors try to get parental consent. They will always ask the student, ‘I’d really like to talk to your family. I’d really like to

talk to mom, whatever it is. Do you mind if I do that?’ Most times, students will say yes.”

Counsellor E thought that his training as a social worker was helpful in the work he did with parents because parents understood the social worker role more than they did that of a counsellor:

The local families are so used to the social work culture of getting help, so that whenever they want to seek help, they would look for a social worker and they feel that’s the norm or like they feel comfortable doing that. ‘Yes, right, that’s the social worker and I should reach him or her to get help for my kids.’ Yea, this is the only, only benefit I enjoyed.

5.4.4 Developing self-advocacy in relationships

Self-advocacy in relationships was related to students developing an ability not to take others’ opinions at face value and to place more importance on their own views. Student H described how counselling had enabled her to think more carefully before assuming someone else’s view was right by helping her to realise “that it’s a lot complicated than I used to think” and that “I don’t make assumptions as quick as before I think a bunch of things before I make my conclusion.” Student L felt she had become more confident in dealing with problems in her friendships and advocating for herself when necessary: “I used to think that everything about myself is wrong no matter what I did ... Now, I feel like, ‘No, that’s not true, that’s their fault.’”

Students felt that counselling helped them to become more empowered in their family situation. Student U said that after counselling he could “face my family more confidently,” and Student P spoke about “getting control back” in her family after counselling: “I felt like I had a sense of authority and control back. That was what I was lacking that really affected me in the first place. So yes, that really helped me a lot.” Student C said that better communication with her mother led to greater capacity to solve problems:

Sharing with mom and my counsellor would help me think of ways to deal with the problem instead of resorting to crying or being stuck in a negative mindset. I think that’s really helpful for my whole life.

Students said that counselling had helped them to develop better relationships with teachers. Student A said she was “more open and more connected with teachers and I’m able to speak with them more confidently.... around teachers, I can be a bit more open and free.” Student N attributed his ability to interact with teacher more to realising that teachers were “just like us”:

Before, I’m scared of teachers. Because, feeling that teachers are authority figure, which you cannot really interact with, because you’ll probably get in trouble but after we’re at the counselling sessions, I just realised that teachers are just like us.”

Counsellors spoke about the importance of developing confidence and how greater self-confidence led to better relationships. Counsellor D explained that helping students to think about and develop a sense of their own agency in relationships could have a positive effect on

them: “if you can, through counselling, get the student to understand that there’s so much of that that is beyond their control and, actually, they can make their own choices, their own standards of what’s acceptable in a relationship.” Counsellor A said that counselling led to better family relationships because students were able to be more assertive and confident:

We do see definite improvement in relationships. If the students themselves know how to say to their parents, ‘Look, I really would work better if this happened’ and to have the confidence and the strength in themselves to say, ‘I can actually have a conversation’ rather than, ‘Yes, mum. No, mum’ or absolute silence.

Self-confidence and self-acceptance were also considered important in developing better relationships. Counsellor E described how he worked with students to “strengthen how they accept themselves, how they know about themselves, aware of what they need, what they are getting from the parents, what they are not getting from what they’re doing” and that this would enable them to “make plans to work out better ways in dealing with family stuff.”

Increased self-confidence also allowed students to develop a more useful way of interacting with teachers, as Counsellor G explained: “They seem to be under the impression that they can’t ask teachers for help, they have to go to an outside tutor which ... a lot of them say don’t really help. So when I tell them, ‘You know ... why don’t you ask the teacher for help?’ it just opens up a new help channel for them.”

Students were also better able to self-advocate with friends as a result of developing greater self-

confidence, as Counsellor A said: “We have a lot of kids who now know they can stand up for others as a result of – not direct counselling but the atmosphere of what we’ve been doing with students and sometimes directly if a child has come with a friend.”

5.5 Process 3. “I guess I feel better about myself”: Experiencing positive emotions and increasing self-efficacy

5.5.1 Improved affect

Counselling gave students a sense of improved affect: they felt happier, more relaxed and more present during and after counselling sessions. This was a result of being able to talk freely. Students talked about feeling “more at ease” (Student Q) and “feeling better” (Student O). Student O said that this feeling was “the whole point of why I always went back,” describing counselling as “caffeine fix”: “It was like coffee, in the sense, ‘Okay, I can go there for relief anyway,’” and went on to describe being rather dependent on the relationship for this sense of relief. Student T related the sense of relief she felt to talking to her counsellor: “Actually, when I express all my feelings to her I feel my pressure is just go away and feel very comfortable. So that’s why it’s helpful to me.” Students said that feeling better happened because the counsellor listened to them. Student L said that the counsellor was “the only one that would listen to me,” and so she “got more happy ... also a lot of stress is gone.”

Feeling better as a result of counselling was not confined only to the counselling sessions but seemed to persist after the sessions. Students reported feeling less anxious, experiencing a better mood, a tendency to think more positively and a greater sense of self-acceptance which led to a feeling of being more reliant on themselves and less concerned about the views of other people. These effects were a new and continuous part of the students' experience. Some students reported positive changes to mood in a very general way. Student A said that, "my mood has been a lot better because of counselling sessions," Student Q felt "more at ease," and Student Y said, "I guess I feel better about myself. Emotionally I'm more stable." Student N summarised how his experience of counselling had made him feel better and how important this had been to him:

If I didn't come to counselling at all, I think this three or two years will be extremely hard for me. I wouldn't be able to focus and work on stuff that much... Before I come to counselling, I was scared of a lot of things, that's why I work a lot. To try to escape from these nightmares, all these fears.... After all these fear, after all the struggles, the mental struggles are gone, I feel more relaxed.

Students seemed to be more aware of their emotional experience after counselling and this increased awareness enabled them to apply learning from their counselling sessions to help themselves feel better. Student H described the application of this learning as being able to "review" her emotions and bring more control to her emotional experience. Student C said that, when she felt unhappy, "I stop myself and think of ways to encourage myself."

5.5.2 The counsellor's qualities

Students felt safe, accepted, listened to and not judged by the counsellor, and sometimes compared this positive attitude with the attitude of their friends or parents. Student Q said that “because if you tell your friends about your feelings or problems, they would easily judge you, but if it’s a counsellor then it’s going to be different because they’re very trustable and they understand you.” Students felt that being able to talk to the counsellor was very helpful because, in the words of Student J, “sometimes when you have some feelings, some emotions, but if you hide it inside your deep heart, you will be so hard to live with it. When I express it, I feel much better.” Student Y said, “some students don’t have many people to talk to. Sometimes their issues, they can’t tell their parents, or teachers or friends about it, so you can tell your counsellors.” Being understood was important to the students and made them feel better. Student R said, “it’s so lonely when I cannot find someone to share about my feelings and experience,” and Student A said, “at least she still understands more than my parents.”

Counselling seems to have helped students feel better by providing a different perspective. Student A said, for example, “they made me realise what’s the point of actually feeling sad. Also there are many more great things in life as well.” Student C thought that talking to the counsellor “wasn’t an immediate solution, but throughout the experience, it helped me become stronger, more emotionally stable because, I could think about it in another way; be more positive... I definitely learned how to change my thinking.”

Counsellors felt that counselling was helpful and gave students some lasting benefit, as

Counsellor D described:

They talk to me about the fact they've had counselling lower down the school and they did feel a positive change and they're okay now. So there's there probably is some lasting benefit.

Counsellors said that students generally felt "relief" after talking to them. Counsellor B thought that students "feel relieved of their burden after talking to me" and Counsellor E said that "90 or even 95 percent" of students "would feel better about themselves" after counselling.

The importance of acceptance, non-judgemental listening and communicating a sense that the counsellor understands the student's perspective came across strongly. Counsellor D thought that "they do find it useful that they can say literally anything and you either won't be shocked or judgmental about it," and Counsellor C said that, "they can talk to me about anything they like and I think they know that ... They know that with me, they can say what they want."

All the counsellors were explicit in their view that listening to students' problems was a key role of a school counsellor and that students valued being able to talk to someone more highly than they valued other aspects of the counselling relationship. Counsellor A said that "the majority of students are looking for somebody to talk to, not necessarily to receive anything from" and that students wanted "somebody to offload all their stuff onto." She went on to say that this "really is, I would say, the main focus of a school counsellor." Counsellor C said of a student that "she just

wants someone to listen to her, that's all she wants." Counsellor E thought that students did not have much concept of counselling as a therapeutic tool but that they wanted to "talk about their problems, to rethink about, to consider different options available for, to solve the problems, they want someone ... they want to be listened. They want to express what they have in their mind."

Counsellors said that talking to the counsellor was important because the students did not have anyone else to talk to, that "they can hardly get a person to listen to them" (Counsellor B) and that "they can't talk to the teachers or they can't talk to the parents" (Counsellor F). Counsellor E thought "I'm the only one they can talk to."

5.5.3 Developing self-efficacy

As students became better at regulating their emotions, they started to have a more positive experience of school. Student D said, for example, "I have an experience that when I feel happy even the quality of my work will be better." Echoing this, Student N said that he was "more focused on working on stuff and stop worrying about stuff," and went on to attribute this to counselling. Student L felt that she "became confident" and "less stubborn" and said that "my whole person changes."

Students described being able to deal with problems more easily as a result of feeling better after counselling. Greater self-acceptance of personal limitations as a result of counselling had a positive impact on students' ability to focus on academic work. Student W thought that, in the

face of academic setbacks, “I won’t be stressed, I won’t be angry, I won’t feel hopeless.” Student B explained that her more positive way of thinking about counselling helped her deal with problems:

I’m still going to be like, “What if I fail this? What if I do something wrong?” But at the same time, I’m also not going to be like, “Why am I over thinking this so much?” I won’t be blaming myself for it. I’d just be focused on the problem at hand.

Although students did seem to think that feeling better led to an increased ability to engage with academic work and to manage their academic commitments better, most did not explicitly link feeling better with improved academic results. One student (Student F) did, however, make this connection, and said that he was “more outgoing, more relaxed, more pro-active and engaging which also shows a great result in my [academic] results.” Two students reported that they had been able to reduce thoughts about self-harm since attending counselling.

Counsellor G described how students came to counselling for immediate relief and developed their own stress relief skills, and described how she was fulfilling the role of an absent parent:

I think they some of them may come to me thinking I will be a stress relief, but we end up working on how they can deal with it next time. So they go away with some coping mechanisms for next time. I think for most of these children because they don’t they don’t grow up with parents who talk to them about their feelings or took time to develop a coping mechanism with them. That it might take a few tries before

they develop coping mechanisms because it's so it's still such unfamiliar territory for them.

Counsellors thought that students developed more confidence as a result of counselling, and that “if they can become more confident after the counselling process, that is, of course, important to them” (Counsellor B). Counsellor A felt that students “come for reassurance, they come for a little bit of a rebuild on their self-esteem.” This increased confidence was, to some extent, a result of developing insight into themselves or their environment. Counsellor D, for example, described the way in which students became more confident after realising they had choice over many areas of their life:

[T]hey start to believe or understand that actually you can't control what other people are doing, you can only really make your own choices. That has that has been quite a growing-up moment for some students to think, ‘Well, I really have got more control over what I choose to do, how I spend my time, how much I let things upset me, and what I could be doing instead.’

Counsellor G explained how students' self-confidence improved as a result of being heard and taken seriously:

For all of them, they feel heard. That means they are important. It helps them to build a certain sense of self-worth because that self-worth is being battered everywhere, I think in high school. So for them to feel like someone cherishes to spend time with

them, usually, at least 40 minutes, they feel there's just certain sense of self-worth in them. Especially as usually with all of them, I try to work on some positive self-esteem exercises with them and asking them what they like about themselves. Usually, they're not asked that.

Counsellor G also felt that counsellors gave students a sense of "love and belonging" and that this gave them confidence to face problems:

I think when they come to another difficult situation, they'll still feel down about it but I think what we give them is a sense of love and belonging and I think that really is important for them when they face difficult situations. For one reason or another, not all of them feel the love and belonging that they want from home or from teachers, or from other adults and I think this is critical for them. It helps them better face other situations when it comes around.

Counsellor G also thought that students developed confidence because they felt that the counsellor was a "back up": "I think there's more confidence because they know there's someone backing them up."

Counsellors thought that students developed a greater sense of self-acceptance after counselling. Counsellor F thought that, after counselling, "they know who they are and they know how to be friend with themselves." Counsellor B thought that this greater self-esteem led to better problem-solving skills: "They may gain some confidence about themselves, their self-esteem enhanced, and for some of them, they may find it easier to deal with the challenges and their struggles."

Counsellor E explained that developing self-acceptance and confidence made students stronger and more able to deal with problems:

It's to strengthen themselves. Their self-esteem, self-confidence, self-acceptance might be, so that they ... after sorting out this stuff, or like building up, they better themselves, they can handle it they can handle the stuff on their own.

5.6 Summary

The central organising concept of the *change processes* thematic domain is that in the context of a strong and stable relationship with their counsellor, students experience change processes which have a significant positive impact on their experience of school and home life. Three change processes were identified. First, through engaging with the counsellor, students were able to question their own ways of thinking and develop new insight which led to a better affect and improved personal resourcefulness. Secondly, developing empathy and practising communication in counselling led students to value their relationships more and to experience greater confidence and self-advocacy in their relationships. Third, talking to a counsellor whom they experienced as accepting, genuine and empathetic enabled students to experience positive emotions which in turn led to greater self-efficacy.

Chapter 6. Discussion

6.1 Overview

Two superordinate themes, referred to as *thematic domains*, have been identified in the data analysis. The *relationship in context* thematic domain emphasises the importance of the sociocultural context and the embeddedness of counselling in the school to the ways in which counselling is experienced by students and counsellors. The macro-processes which students experience in counselling are discussed and attention is drawn to the ways in which the study's findings contribute to our understanding of these processes through a comparison with the literature. The second thematic domain, *change processes*, consists of three therapeutic micro-processes experienced by students as they engage in counselling: *new ways of thinking*, *developing better relationships* and *experiencing positive emotions and increasing self-efficacy*. Each of these processes is discussed in turn. A modified mid-range theory is proposed to account for the experiences of participants. The relationship between change processes and counselling modalities is explored briefly.

6.2 Thematic domain 1: Relationship in context

The first thematic domain, *relationship in context*, describes the macro-processes which students experience as they approach counselling and develop a counselling relationship in the context of the school and in the wider Hong Kong Chinese sociocultural environment. It also describes the

consequences of this relationship building process, namely the development of ongoing social and emotional support which students derive from their counsellors.

Based on the findings of the present study, SBC can be conceptualised as consisting of several stages. First, a student was referred to the counselling service by a teacher or, more rarely, a parent, or they self-referred. During this stage, the student contemplated counselling and experienced some fear and uncertainty and, sometimes, had hopes and expectations about counselling, and made initial contact with the counsellor. As a result of experiencing the counsellor as trustworthy, a stable relationship then developed which was characterised by informality and equality and in which the student felt accepted and understood. This relationship functioned as a source of ongoing emotional support which the student found helpful but which counsellors saw as having the potential to foster dependency.

6.2.1 The pre-counselling stage

The pre-counselling stage describes students' attitudes towards and thoughts about counselling prior to their first meeting with a counsellor and during their first encounters.

Students experienced significant fear and uncertainty about attending counselling at this stage and were often resistant to do so. This is consistent with the literature, where feelings of fear and insecurity have been reported as young people consider counselling. Binder et al. (2011) found that clients felt vulnerable and distrustful of their counsellors during initial encounters, and Lavik

et al. (2018) have described this as “facing a scary situation” (p. 266). Watsford et al. (2013) concluded that adolescent clients generally do not know what to expect of counselling.

Students were more initially positive about counselling if they had some prior experience of counselling or if they had heard something positive about counselling from a friend, a finding consistent with that of Vogel, Wade, Wester, Larson, and Hackler (2007), who report that individuals are more likely to seek help when they know someone who has previously sought help.

The fear and uncertainty experienced by students as they contemplated counselling seems to have been a particularly prominent feature of their experience and, in this regard, the study’s findings departed from those of previous research. Students had a very poor concept of counselling before they started to attend sessions and experienced significant doubt and worry which made them reluctant to engage in counselling. Students were afraid of being labelled as being weak or having “something wrong” with them and used terms such as “crazy” and “lunatic” to describe what people thought of students who went to counselling. Some students said they wanted to hide their attendance at counselling from classmates, teachers and parents, and some were also afraid of being judged negatively by the counsellor. Counsellors felt that both students and, to an even greater extent, their parents may feel shame about counselling. Students were more motivated to attend counselling if they thought it was important to deal with their problems, despite what other people might think, but this usually meant that students were very distressed by the time they approached a counsellor.

6.2.2 Building a counselling relationship

A relationship between the student and the counsellor started to develop as students overcame their initial fears and uncertainties in the first few encounters with their counsellor. In most respects, the study's findings were consistent with the extant literature.

Previous research has found that the counselling relationship is central to counselling and that students value a welcoming and non-judgemental attitude on the part of the counsellor and a sense that the counsellor cares about them personally (Binder et al., 2011; Gibson & Cartwright, 2014; Westergaard, 2013). The results of the study support these findings, showing that the counsellor's warm, accepting attitude and a sense that the counsellor cared, communicated through a perception that students were being listened to, were important.

Counsellors' personal qualities and behaviour led to the development of trust, which in turn allowed the formation of a deeper relationship characterised by stability, informality and equality. Trust building was particularly salient in developing a counselling relationship: students developed trust in the counsellor over time as they experienced that information was not disclosed to other people, and both students and counsellors said that the disclosure of personal information within the counselling relationship became easier over time. This finding is consistent with previous research which has reported the importance of trust in establishing a counselling relationship. Prior (2012) found that developing trust in the school counsellor was key to engaging in counselling and that a perception of trust was associated with the assurance of confidentiality as well as the counsellor's accepting and non-judgemental attitude. Both Tatar

(2001) and Westergaard (2013) found that the assurance of confidentiality and the establishment of a trusting relationship were the most important factors in the effectiveness of counselling, and Everall and Paulson (2002) found that a trustworthy counsellor was associated with a more positive experience of counselling. Davis (2015) found that trust was a precursor to students “feeling able to open up” and was part of the way in which students experienced “developing a safe space” (p. 42). Cooper (2009) and Griffiths (2013) found that young peoples’ concerns about confidentiality could inhibit the counselling processes. Lavik et al. (2018) have also identified trust as a necessary component throughout the counselling process.

The study’s findings indicate that students valued being listened to because they felt that this showed the counsellor cared about them, was not just doing their job, and they contrasted this with parents who did not seem to listen. Counsellors thought that students being able to talk was the most positive experience for them. Previous studies have found that clients value talking and being listened to (Cooper, 2004, 2009; Dunne et al., 2000; Hill et al., 2011, Lynass et al., 2012), and so the present study’s findings are consistent with this body of research. Both students and counsellors said that students valued being accepted, cared for, understood, and not being judged. Adolescents have reported a more positive experience of counselling when the counsellor is accepting and supportive (Everall & Paulson, 2002) and non-judgemental (McArthur et al., 2016), elements which are similar to Rogers’s (1957) condition of unconditional positive regard. Students feeling that counsellors are not simply doing their job but have genuine concern for them may also be regarded as an indication of the presence of Rogers’s (1957) condition of congruence.

Students said that their counsellors seemed to understand them and that being understood made them feel better. Crocket et al. (2015) found that clients valued “feeling understood and supported” (p. 39). Gibson & Cartwright (2014) found that clients valued being understood and that, where clients did not feel understood, it was because the counsellor was not very engaged in the relationship. These findings are supported by those from the present study and the students’ experience of being understood may be a marker for the Rogerian condition of empathy.

An informal and stable relationship developed over time and counsellors felt that this provided a safe environment for clients. Counsellors felt that the relationship was the most important element in counselling and that, without this strong relationship, therapeutic change could not occur. Several studies have supported the view that a good relationship is a necessary condition for effective counselling. School counsellors in Gilat and Rosenau’s (2012) study reported that they had been most successful when they had developed strong relationships with their clients, and Gibson and Cartwright (2014) described the counselling relationship as “fundamental” (p. 519) to many clients. Binder et al. (2011) described the relationship as being characterised by “emotional closeness” (p. 562) and the “welcoming attitude” and “sensitivity” (p. 560) of the counsellor. Lavik et al. (2018) have emphasised the importance of a “warm, invested and emotionally engaged” counsellor (p. 257) where mutuality is emphasised, the establishment of which supports the student’s developmental need for increasing autonomy. Emotional closeness also seems to have been a particularly important feature in the relationships which developed between students and counsellors, as findings from the present study suggest that a deep emotional connection with the counsellor is a precursor to positive change.

The literature is silent on the speed with which a relationship is formed in adolescent counselling. The present study indicates that, when students began counselling, they usually quickly establish a strong and lasting counselling relationship. Students typically had significant levels of distress and so, once students had overcome the initial barriers to attending counselling, they found the experience of counselling very beneficial as they developed a relationship with the counsellor.

6.2.3 An ongoing but limited source of support

The theme of an ongoing but limited source of support describes the way in which the counsellor becomes a long-term provider of emotional and social support for the student. The social and emotional benefits students experience from counselling are so significant that they often come to regard the counsellor as a permanent feature of their school life and from whom they derive a great deal of emotional and practical support. This aspect of counselling has not been explored in previous research.

Students said that their perceptions of counselling changed very quickly and significantly, and that they soon came to see counselling as surprisingly helpful and conferring benefits they had not expected. Having experienced counselling, students were glad the school had a counselling service and even recommended counselling to friends. Both students and counsellors said that the relationship between them became more casual over time and also became embedded into the client's experience of school. Students appreciated that the counsellor seemed to care about them, made time for them, was available and made them a priority, and even made contact with

them outside counselling sessions. Counsellors agreed that students valued a sense of belonging and a caring relationship. Students also liked the flexibility of the counselling service and being able to drop in casually when they wanted to see the counsellor.

Students did not make any comment on the reasons for the development of the wider supportive role of the counsellors: they simply took it for granted. Counsellors, however, felt that the strength and importance of the relationship students formed with them was partly due to students having weak support at home and said that they sometimes carried out a role similar to a parent, though they felt that students understood that the relationship was a professional one. This finding echoes that of Westergaard (2013), who concludes that the relationship is particularly important where “relationships of trust with adults in their lives may be in short supply” (p. 103), and this may be particularly the case in the Hong Kong context, where relationships between parents and children are relatively hierarchical and authoritarian.

Few students thought that counselling was ineffective, though both students and counsellors felt that the impact of counselling could be limited. Some students thought that some problems were too personal to ever be disclosed. Some said they sometimes felt judged by their counsellor and that counselling could be intense and difficult, in some cases compounded by the dual or multiple roles that counsellors had. Counsellors thought that change could be slow and that it was possible for a counsellor to cause harm by not taking into account a student’s full social and family context.

Although students in the current study reported that they valued the close, informal and equal relationship they developed with their counsellor, it appears that the ability of the counsellor to set boundaries and behave professionally was important to students. Limited and relevant self-disclosure does seem to have been helpful to students in the sense that it enabled them to feel that the counsellor was more genuine. This is consistent with findings from previous research: Cooper (2009) and Griffiths (2013) both found that clients valued the counsellor's ability to set up clear boundaries in the relationship and to engage in appropriate self-disclosure.

6.2.4 Counselling embedded within the school and the culture

On the diagram showing the thematic domains (Figure 4.1), the theme labelled *counselling embedded within the school and the culture* is depicted as surrounding all the other themes in the *relationship in context* thematic domain since the other themes, while independent from each other, cannot be considered in isolation from the context in which counselling occurs. The influences of the sociocultural context and the school setting on the counselling process are considered separately below.

6.2.4.1 *The influence of the sociocultural context*

From an ecological systems theory perspective, the processes taking place in counselling may be influenced by the Chinese sociocultural context. The study's findings indicate that this is the

case, with the influence of elements of the sociocultural context being more prominent in the initiation and development stages of the counselling process.

Students were initially reluctant to disclose personal information since they were unsure if they could trust the counsellor, whom they described as being an authority figure, “like a teacher” or “a stranger.” Students also thought that talking to the counsellor was awkward and unnatural at first. Counsellors said that students’ reluctance to disclose was a significant barrier to their work and they associated this reluctance with a cultural tendency for students to find speaking to people outside their family about personal issues as difficult, unnatural or even shameful.

Students’ reluctance to engage with counselling in the pre-counselling stage has been reported in previous studies (Binder et al., 2011; Lavik et al., 2018; Watsford et al., 2013) but this appears to be heightened by several features of the sociocultural context. The role of the family is central in Hong Kong society and research indicates that the family has a strong influence on help-seeking behaviour (Mo & Mak, 2009; Ow & Katz, 1999). It is often considered inappropriate or even shameful to discuss private information, particularly related to family matters, with outsiders (Kim et al., 2009). Several counsellors and even one student (Student Y) explicitly commented on this feature of the cultural context influencing students’ help-seeking behaviour.

In addition, mental health issues are often pathologised in Hong Kong and there is significant stigma attached to psychological problems (Chow, 2015; Tsang et al., 2003). Students are therefore more likely to experience shame and fear as they contemplate counselling. The stigma attached to mental health issues associated with Chinese culture was remarked on by Counsellor H, who described parents thinking their children were “crazy,” and by Student Y, whose father

she described as thinking of her as “weak,” “a bad student” and a “loser.” The social stigma associated with counselling has been found to positively correlate with Asian cultural values (Miville & Constantine, 2007). Given that such social stigma associated with counselling not only applies to the student receiving the service but also to the entire social network (Kim et al., 2009), the pressure imposed on young clients to conform, rather than to differ by going to counselling, may be greater than in other Western contexts, where more individualistic cultures are observed. Finally, a poor understanding of counselling in Hong Kong society and the low professional status of counsellors (Lam & Yeung, 2017) may also contribute to students’ reluctance to engage in counselling. Counsellor E remarked that counselling was “not well embraced” and “not common.”

Previous research has indicated that trust is particularly important in establishing a sufficiently strong counselling relationship to allow therapeutic change to occur (Davis, 2015; Everall & Paulson, 2002; Prior, 2012; Westergaard, 2013) and the present study strongly supports this finding. Students saw developing trust as the most significant process that took place in building a relationship with the counsellor. Counsellors and students did not explicitly link trust to the Chinese context, but the importance of establishing trust may be heightened in the sociocultural context of the study, given the reluctance of Chinese adolescents to disclose personal information outside the family (Ow & Katz, 1999).

The perception of the counsellor as an authority figure seems to have reduced significantly as a counselling relationship developed, and students came to see the relationship with their counsellors as more equal and informal. They did not appear to continue to see counsellors as

authority figures after a relationship was formed. Deference to authority figures as an Asian cultural value has been found to foster stronger alliances between counsellors and clients (Kim, Li & Liang, 2002) and so, while students may be reluctant to start counselling due to their perception of counsellors as authority figures like teachers, the asymmetry of the relationship may actually enrich the experience and outcome of counselling, although this possibility is speculative and awaits further research.

Previous research has suggested that Chinese counselling clients prefer a more structured style of counselling and favour a counsellor who is “active, directive, and present-oriented” (Ng & James, 2013, p. 11) over a more client-centred and insight-oriented approach. Studies conducted by Cao (2008), Kuo et al. (2011), Lin (2001) and Wei and Heppner (2005) have concluded that Chinese clients prefer a counsellor who provides information and gives suggestions. From the results of the present study, it appears that clients value their counsellor giving them suggestions and ideas, though there is no indication that they prefer a more directive, advice-giving style. Indeed, clients contrasted their counselling experience with parents and friends who tended to give advice. The role of the counsellor in the present study is consonant with the findings of qualitative studies which have consistently found that young people value advice given by their counsellor, though the advice needs to be in the form of suggestions and possibilities and not given as directives (Cooper, 2004; Griffiths, 2013).

Counsellors felt that the support of parents was important to their work and they were mixed in their views of the support parents gave. While some were supportive and approached the counsellors for help, others were resistant and even hostile to their children having counselling,

and counsellors attributed this to misunderstanding and more negative, traditional views about mental health issues, which may be attributed to the influence of Chinese culture. Students sometimes felt it necessary to hide their attendance at counselling from their parents, though they continued to attend because they were deriving so much benefit from it. Counsellors felt that working with parents and students could be “transformative” for the whole family. Research conducted by Kazdin et al. (1997) and Zack et al. (2007) found that a good relationship between counsellor and parent is associated with the continuation of therapy, though such a relationship has little effect on counselling outcomes (Karver et al., 2006). Parents are less likely to be engaged in counselling if they use harsh child-rearing strategies (Kazdin et al., 1997) and good counselling outcomes are less likely for children whose parents use guilt and withdrawal of privileges as punishment (Gorin, 1993). As Hue (2016) points out, traditional Chinese practices used by parents to socialise their children consist of “threatening, scolding, shaming and punishment” (p. 12), and so it may be the case that Hong Kong parents who adopt such an authoritarian parenting style may be less accepting of, and less willing to allow their children to engage in, counselling.

6.2.4.2 The influence of the school setting

The counsellors serving at the schools which contributed to the present study were embedded into the school and not independent practitioners: the counsellors were located in the school, had their own rooms and all but one was employed directly by the school. Most of the counsellors also had dual or even multiple roles. For example, one counsellor also taught some classes, and

another was a college guidance administrator in addition to her counselling role. The way in which the counsellors' roles at school were organised appeared to have an impact on the counselling processes.

Counsellors valued their embeddedness into the school, even going so far as to seek out opportunities to be more involved in the wider life of the school, and they felt that the embeddedness of counselling conferred several advantages: it gave them a better understanding of the students' experience of school which led to a better connection with students and the promotion of more trusting relationships; it helped them to become more well-known, to raise their profile with students and hence to become more approachable to the student community. Participation in school life also allowed more casual interactions between counsellors and students to take place. Counsellors also thought, however, that multiple roles might limit the trust students had in them, and also that the other roles they undertook added to their workload.

Students did not explicitly mention the embedded nature of counselling. This is to be expected since students experience counselling as an individual activity and not in a systemic way, although their experience is strongly influenced by the wider ecological context. They did recognise that aspects of counselling, such as ongoing concerns about confidentiality as a result of counsellors being part of the school and having other roles, were influenced by its embedded nature.

Familiarity with and access to counsellors and different opportunities to engage with them was possible because of the embeddedness of counselling in the life of the school, leading to

counsellors being able to develop relationships with students more easily. Embeddedness also made it possible for counsellors to work closely with teachers, who are a useful source of information and support.

Students' concerns about confidentiality at the initiation stage were heightened by counsellors' embeddedness into the school: they were concerned about their close relationships with teachers and also by the dual or multiple roles counsellors had. These concerns may be a particularly difficult barrier to overcome in a small, highly cohesive and collectivist society such as Hong Kong and also given that the school itself is a fairly small community where an individual student's activities are difficult to hide from other people.

The embeddedness of counselling in the school enabled the development of long-term counselling relationships through the availability of the counsellor. This may not otherwise have been possible. Students were able to access ongoing support, and counsellors were able to develop a deep understanding of the school culture. However, it also meant that counselling had limitations, and both students and counsellors spoke about this. All of the participants were clear that school counselling was limited in effectiveness and they attributed this to the school setting in which counselling took place. Confidentiality concerns related to counsellor's embeddedness in the school, and awkward and confusing interactions as a result of counsellors' multiple roles were sources of ongoing problems for students. Counsellors felt that multiple roles required them to adopt different types of behaviour in different situations. For example, being a class teacher involved maintaining order and discipline, a behaviour which seemed inconsistent with showing

empathy and unconditional positive regard. Also, counsellors felt that having a non-counselling role meant that they had less time to devote to counselling.

Previous research (Lieberman, 2004) has revealed a wide variation in the roles school counsellors take on, and the situation in Hong Kong is very diverse. Part of the confusion may lie in the different ways in which counselling is conceptualised. In Hong Kong, counselling is related to guidance and the holistic development of the student and is also often regarded as either an aspect of, or even synonymous with, social work and teaching. It may be the case, therefore, that a lack of clarity around the role of counsellors also limits the effectiveness of counselling.

Both students and counsellors spoke about the practical constraints to counselling. Students said that counsellors were busy and that scheduling conflicts and having to miss lessons to attend counselling inhibited their attendance. Counsellors also said that they were very busy and that they were burdened by administrative tasks. Further, counsellors said that the school's focus on academic matters made it more difficult to see students since teachers and students gave academic matters a much higher priority: even when a teacher was supportive of counselling, for example, they would put limits on when they were prepared to allow a student to miss class for counselling.

The limited research into the effect of the embeddedness of counselling into a school culture suggests that schools which adopt an ownership model, where counselling is integrated into the systems which address students' wellbeing and pastoral care, are better able to address students'

mental health effectively and that closer collaboration with teachers is desirable and supports mental health provision (Spratt et al., 2006). While this may be the case, an ownership model may not have a positive effect on individual counselling outcomes, and studies into SBC in the UK have found that students value their counsellor's independence from the school (Griffiths, 2013). The study's findings are consistent with the previous literature in the sense that the counsellor's embeddedness in the school, and particularly any other roles they might have, appear to limit what students are willing to disclose and hence to limit the effectiveness of counselling. As such, perceived independence from the school may be regarded as a helpful factor. However, students do find that the availability of the counsellor enables them to draw ongoing emotional and social support from the counsellor and so, in this sense, the counsellor's embeddedness is a helpful factor. This finding is consistent with that of Knight, Gibson, and Cartwright (2018), who report that students accessing a counselling service in New Zealand appreciated the flexibility to "pop in and out" (p. 7) as needed.

Counsellors felt that the support of teachers was important to their work and they had mixed views on the extent to which this support was present. While they generally felt supported by the schools' senior leadership, counsellors felt that teachers, although generally valuing the counselling service and being supportive of it, did not always understand the nature and purpose of counselling and that greater contact with teachers was desirable to improve their level of understanding and support. In a study into teacher perceptions, Clark and Amatea (2004) found that teachers believed that counsellors' "visibility and involvement in the total school" was "essential to the overall school programme" (p. 138) and in a study investigating the experiences of teachers working with school counsellors in an American school district, Cholewa, Goodman-

Scott, Thomas, and Cook (2017) concluded that teachers valued close contact and collaboration with school counsellors. The latter made a number of recommendations for improving contact with teachers, including proactively building rapport with teachers, increasingly availability and visibility, soliciting feedback from teachers and marketing consultative services to teachers.

6.2.5 Differences in the perspectives of students and counsellors

Data from the student and counsellor interviews were analysed separately and the themes which were developed from the analysis were then combined to give a comprehensive account of the counselling process. However, significant differences exist between the perspectives of the students and the counsellors.

In the pre-counselling stage, most students experienced considerable doubt and hesitation. These fears mainly concerned confidentiality, other people's perceptions and the effectiveness of counselling. Students used pejorative terms to describe people who attend counselling such as "lunatic" and "attention seeker." While counsellors also reported the initial fears and barriers that clients experienced, their views are more balanced in the sense that they acknowledged such feelings as normal and they presented positive as well as negative impressions of students on their initial encounters of counselling. Counsellors recognised students' fears about being labelled by other students, parents and even teachers, and that counselling was, for many, a last resort. Counsellors, however, had the view that most students were open to counselling and that a lack of familiarity with the counselling service was more significant than other factors. This

study suggests that counsellors underestimate students' fears about being labelled and experiencing shame in attending counselling, and that students may not feel able to overcome the stigma of attending counselling.

Once students started to develop a relationship with the counsellor, their perception changed dramatically. They got over their anxieties and qualms, began to see the benefits of counselling and were able to embrace the experience of being counselled. Indeed, they often expressed surprise at how helpful they found counselling to be, a feature of their experience which counsellors did not seem to recognise clearly. Like the students, counsellors conceptualised the counselling relationship in positive terms. Instead of highlighting such attributes as informality and comfort, however, counsellors focused more on creating a safe and non-judgemental counselling environment, both physically and emotionally. Making students feel safe and not judged was thus a central and recurring concern in the counsellors' perspectives. Counsellors, at the same time, acknowledged the challenges and practical constraints involved in building a relationship and the factors that may affect a counselling relationship. In other words, counsellors took into account a number of wider issues, rather than simply focusing on expressing their perceptions on the nature of the relationship. Their characterisation of the relationship therefore entailed the consideration of individual differences and variation in school-based counselling.

As regards the level of hierarchy and duration of the counselling relationship, counsellors tended to perceive it to be hierarchical and temporary, as reflected in their choice of terms marking the level of seniority and their warning against long-term counselling. In this respect, their

perspective seems to be more attuned to the value of Confucianism, whereby counsellors are typically seen as figures of authority rather than as equals. In the local context, the hierarchy in the counselling relationship seems particularly relevant, as counsellors often also serve as teachers in schools (cf. Hue, 2008). Students, in comparison, characterise the relationship as a long-lasting friendship with more equal status, as reflected by their choice of reference terms marking solidarity and comradeship and by their more positive portrayal of the benefits of long-term counselling. This mismatch in the perception of the counselling relationship between stakeholders coming from the same culture suggests that the ways in which cultural values may affect the experience of school-based counselling are varied, intricate and complex (see, for example, Miville & Constantine, 2007).

Both students and counsellors were very clear that the counsellor constituted a source of ongoing emotional support, though there were differences in the way this support was characterised and interpreted. Students were generally very positive about this aspect of their relationship with the counsellor and saw the counsellor as a resource they could use in times of difficulty, though some students also felt that they could develop a dependency on their counsellor which might not be helpful. Counsellors were much more guarded in the way they spoke about this ongoing support. While recognising that students did sometimes need ongoing support, they generally used more negative language to describe this long-term support. Students described their counsellors as a “safety net,” whereas counsellors felt that being a “shelter” for students was not helpful since the counsellor could become a “crutch” or a “place to hide” and that counselling should ideally be a shorter-term intervention which enabled students to manage problems more independently. Knight et al. (2018) found that students accessing a school counselling service in

New Zealand described counselling as a “refuge” (p. 6). The study looked only at the perspective of students and the present study is consistent with this finding.

6.2.6 Summary: Thematic domain 1

The present study’s findings have extended our understanding of the macro-processes taking place in counselling in several ways, a summary of which follows.

The study adds to our understanding of the significance of the barriers which exist to engaging in counselling for Chinese students in Hong Kong. While these barriers have been reported elsewhere (Binder et al., 2011; Watsford et al., 2013), they appear to be heightened as a result of a cultural tendency to see mental health issues and counselling in a pathological way (Chow, 2015; Mo & Mak, 2009; Tsang et al., 2003) and feelings of shame associated with revealing information of a personal nature to people outside of the family (Kim et al., 2009; Ow & Katz, 1999), as well as concerns about confidentiality related to a small community in the context of a low-trust society. A cultural perception of counsellors as authority figures may also make help seeking less likely. The study underlines the helpfulness of parents being supportive of counselling and suggests that parents who have more traditional Chinese beliefs and parenting behaviours may be less likely to be supportive and may constitute a barrier to students attending counselling. The study also suggests that counsellors underestimate students’ fears about being labelled and experiencing shame in attending counselling, and that students may not feel able to overcome the stigma of attending counselling.

Previous research has indicated that relationship building is a key process and is necessary for therapeutic change to occur in counselling (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014; Karver et al., 2006). The present study's findings are consistent with this research, and also suggest that the Rogerian conditions of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard are essential components of this relationship. The study's findings suggest that the establishment of trust is an important component of building a counselling relationship. This is consistent with previous research (Davis, 2015; Everall & Paulson, 2002; Prior, 2012), but the study suggests that establishing trust may be even more prominent in the Hong Kong sociocultural context. Students seem to have developed good relationships with their counsellors rather quickly, and the high levels of fear and uncertainty experienced by students followed by the rapid development of a close and supportive relationship has not been reported elsewhere. The reasons for this are unclear but may be related to the sociocultural context where relationships between adolescents and adults such as parents and teachers are relatively hierarchical and authoritarian (Hue, 2016). In this context, the experience of a relationship with an adult characterised by equality, warmth and informality may provide a strong source of support.

The study also adds to our understanding of the ways in which school counsellors' embeddedness into a school as a component of the way a school is organised can be simultaneously a helpful and an unhelpful factor. Embeddedness provides familiarity, easy access to the counsellor and more opportunities to engage, and so allows students to experience their counsellors as a significant source of social and emotional support. While students see this support as a positive part of their school experience, counsellors have concerns about the benefits of this support and see its potential risk to foster unhealthy dependency. The study's findings

also suggest that the embeddedness of counselling in the life of the school creates a tension between the needs and expectations of students and the beliefs of counsellors about what constitutes their role. This tension is indicative of a lack of role clarity. The effectiveness of counselling is also limited due to ongoing confidentiality concerns. It may, therefore, be that a counsellor's embeddedness in school life provides better non-therapeutic support to students but limits the therapeutic effectiveness of counselling itself. The present study supports previous findings regarding the importance of counsellors being visible and involved in the life of the school (Clark & Amatea, 2004) and collaborating closely with teachers (Cholewa et al., 2017), though with a caveat that students' perceptions of counsellors being too closely aligned with teachers may limit what can be achieved in counselling.

This study's findings are not consistent with those of previous research with adults which has suggested that Chinese clients prefer a more directive style of counselling (Cao, 2008; Kuo et al., 2011; Ng & James, 2013), and this may be one area where a difference exists between school-aged clients and older clients.

6.3 Thematic domain 2: Change processes

Change processes is the second thematic domain developed from the data and describes the micro-processes which students experience as they engage in counselling which lead to helpful outcomes. These processes seek to link the actions of the counsellor and the student to helpful therapeutic outcomes and also to the ways in which these outcomes influence a students'

experience of school. The change processes developed in the present study are derived by considering the reported experiences of both students and counsellors.

Three change processes were identified and labelled *new ways of thinking*, *developing better relationships* and *experiencing positive emotion and increasing self-efficacy*. In the first of these processes, students developed insight into their patterns of thinking and became more realistic about and accepting of their problems. This led to optimism and greater self-efficacy. In the second process, they learned to connect with other people better through practising communication, developing social skills and learning to empathise. This connection enabled students to value their relationships more, to become more accepting of other people and to experience greater self-advocacy in relationships. In the third process, students experienced positive emotions as a result of being able to talk and feeling that they were understood and accepted, and this led to a better mood, greater confidence and a feeling of ease which, in turn, allowed them to be more focused at school.

These change processes are not completely independent from each other and there is some overlap between them. Most students reported having experienced more than one change process and a significant minority reported having experienced all three. Naturally, what actually happens in counselling is complex and nuanced and change processes are inevitably simplified in their representation. However, given the data examined, the processes do capture many of the salient experiences of students as they engage in counselling.

Each of the change processes is discussed in turn, and Figures 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 show each process conceptualised as a series of steps from the perspective of the student. A summary showing the processes in terms of the activities of counsellors and students and the therapeutic outcomes, is given in Figure 6.4.

6.3.1 Process 1. New ways of thinking

Counsellors were able to act as “facilitators,” “guides” or “companions,” who encouraged exploration on the part of students, often by asking questions. With the help of counsellors, students were able to reflect on their experience and ask themselves pertinent questions, leading to more realistic ways of thinking and greater acceptance of their experience. This in turn led to students feeling better and developing a greater sense of optimism and, as a result of this, students experienced greater self-efficacy: they were better able to face up to problems and became more confident in finding their own ways of dealing with them. This process is summarised diagrammatically in Figure 6.1.

Cognitive approaches to counselling seek to enable clients to make therapeutic gains through learning to think in different ways and there is a significant amount of evidence from the literature showing that such approaches are effective, although the causative mechanisms proposed as leading to change have been questioned (Longmore & Worrell, 2007).

Both students and counsellors recognised that the role of the counsellor was central to the process of developing insight. Counsellors described themselves as facilitators, companions and catalysts. Both students and counsellors felt that it was helpful for the counsellor to make suggestions and ask questions which enabled the students to engage in exploration and to question their way of thinking. Students felt that the counsellors' objectivity and life experience were important features which made the counsellors effective, and they contrasted their counsellor with parents and friends, who were less helpful because they tended to give direct advice.

Students felt that they were able to develop more realistic ways of thinking and become more accepting of their experience through a process of responding to the counsellor's questions and reflecting on their thinking. This in turn enabled them to feel better and they were able to use these new ways of thinking to develop greater self-efficacy: they became more objective, were less easily upset by things and engaged in better self-care. Counsellors also felt that students were able to transfer their insights into daily life and develop greater self-efficacy. Both students and counsellors described this process as transformative. Greater self-efficacy resulted from attending counselling and students developed better self-worth. The greater acceptance of experience, better emotional regulation and self-care may indicate that these outcomes have taken place. Students reported a greater acceptance of their experience and an increased ability to cope with negative experiences and emotions.

This process is consistent with the findings of previous research: developing insight has been reported by several previous studies. Dunne et al. (2000) found that the development of insight

was a common and significant outcome of counselling, and McArthur et al. (2016) identified the development of “insight and understanding” (p. 94) as a change process, whereas Crocket et al. (2015) identified “insight and awareness” (p. 32) as a result of counselling. In their reviews of helpful factors in SBC, Cooper (2009) and Griffiths (2013) identified the categories of “insight” (p. 145) and “insight and self-awareness” (p. 7) respectively. Studies conducted by Lynass et al. (2012) and Gibson and Cartwright (2014) found that clients felt happier and more positive after their experience of counselling as a result of developing insight. Garmy et al. (2015) found that developing insight into the ways in which their thoughts, emotions and behaviour were connected, allowed adolescent clients to manage stress better by transferring this insight into their daily lives. McArthur et al. (2016) found that the development of insight was linked to increased self-awareness and the present study’s findings are consistent with this.

6.3.2 Process 2. Developing better relationships

Counsellors facilitated students’ development of better relationships in three ways. First, counsellors helped students to practise communication, leading to greater confidence and better social skills which, in turn, led to students being more assertive in their relationships and being able to take more social risks. Second, through developing a greater sense of empathy, students were able to experience closer and more open relationships.

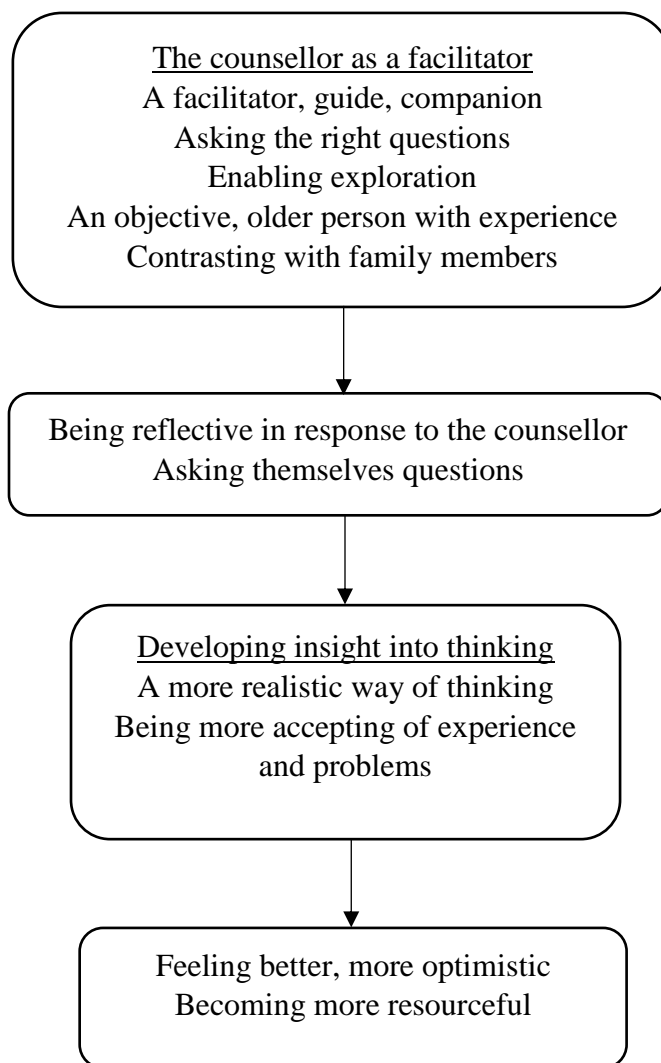


Figure 6.1. Change process: “The most important thing is the insight”: New ways of thinking

Third, counsellors helped students to explore the nature of their relationships, leading to the development of greater insight into their relationships and a better understanding of the impact of their own behaviour on others. This in turn led to students valuing relationships with friends and family more, and also to greater self-advocacy in relationships, particularly with teachers and

parents. Sometimes, counsellors worked with parents and students together and, in doing so, helped students to develop empathy and insight into their family relationships. This process is summarised diagrammatically in Figure 6.2.

Both students and counsellors reported that better relationships with family members, friends and teachers developed after counselling, a finding consistent with studies into change processes which have found that clients often report having better relationships as a result of counselling (Crocket et al., 2015; Garmy et al., 2015; Lynass et al., 2012; McArthur et al., 2016), and that better relationships are linked with several other underlying changes.

Both students and counsellors saw communication as a key component of counselling. Students valued a safe, non-judgemental environment where they could develop communication skills, and they saw the counsellor as having a key facilitative role. Students reported that talking in counselling sessions enabled them to gain confidence and develop better social skills, and this in turn led to better social connections and relationships outside of counselling. Counsellors also thought that, through counselling, students were able to develop confidence which led to better relationships. McArthur et al. (2016) found that the listening skills developed in counselling enabled clients to develop better relationships and identified “improved relational skills” (p. 95) as a change process taking place in SBC.

Students spoke about developing empathy as a result of counselling and that this led them to understand other people more and to alter their expectations of other significant people in their lives, such as parents. The development of empathy leading to better relationships is consistent

with the finding of Garmy et al. (2015), who concluded that an increased level of empathy was an underlying change which enabled the development of better relationships.

Students felt that counselling helped them to develop insight into the nature of their relationships and to value their friendships more. They felt that they had become more assertive and felt more empowered in their relationships with family members and teachers and they came to see teachers less as authority figures and more approachable. Counsellors also thought that students developed more confidence and greater self-advocacy in their relationships and reported that students were able to approach teachers more confidently, for example, after counselling. Communication is one area where this confidence is seen to have developed very strongly.

While it is the case that a focus on relationship issues is particularly significant, better family relationships do not seem to have been more of a focus than other relationships in students' lives. This said, the impact of better family relationships does seem to be very important. Both students and counsellors felt that counsellors engaging in direct communication with parents was helpful and that counsellors working with both students and their parents could be transformative for the whole family. Hue's (2008) study found that guidance teachers in Hong Kong felt that one of their important roles was to help students to establish good relationships within their family, and that this was a result of the influence of Confucianism on Chinese socialisation.

6.3.3 Process 3. Experiencing positive emotions and increasing self-efficacy

Counsellors provided an environment where students felt a sense of care and belonging and where they felt they had a voice. Students experienced their counsellors as listening, accepting and understanding. Talking to the counsellor helped them to feel more at ease and they experienced a better mood, greater confidence and a more positive way of thinking. These effects persisted after the session had ended and, as a result of their better affect, students reported being more focused, having an improved ability to concentrate and being more self-accepting. This process is summarised diagrammatically in Figure 6.3.

Both students and counsellors said that counselling was a source of relief and shared the view that expressing emotions was cathartic. Some students thought that this was the most important aspect of their counselling experience. Both students and counsellors also thought that the counsellor listening non-judgementally and providing a safe, warm environment was key to enabling students to express their emotions. The counsellor's warm and non-judgemental attitude enabling students to explore emotions and feel relief is consistent with Karver et al.'s (2006) findings that counsellors' interpersonal skills such as empathy, warmth and genuineness were correlated with therapeutic outcomes (effect size, $d = 0.75$). Other studies have concluded that a positive experience of counselling is associated with authenticity and empathy (Knight et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2007), with an accepting, supportive and trustworthy counsellor (Everall & Paulson, 2002) and when "emotional closeness" is a feature of the counselling relationship (Binder et al., 2011, p. 562).

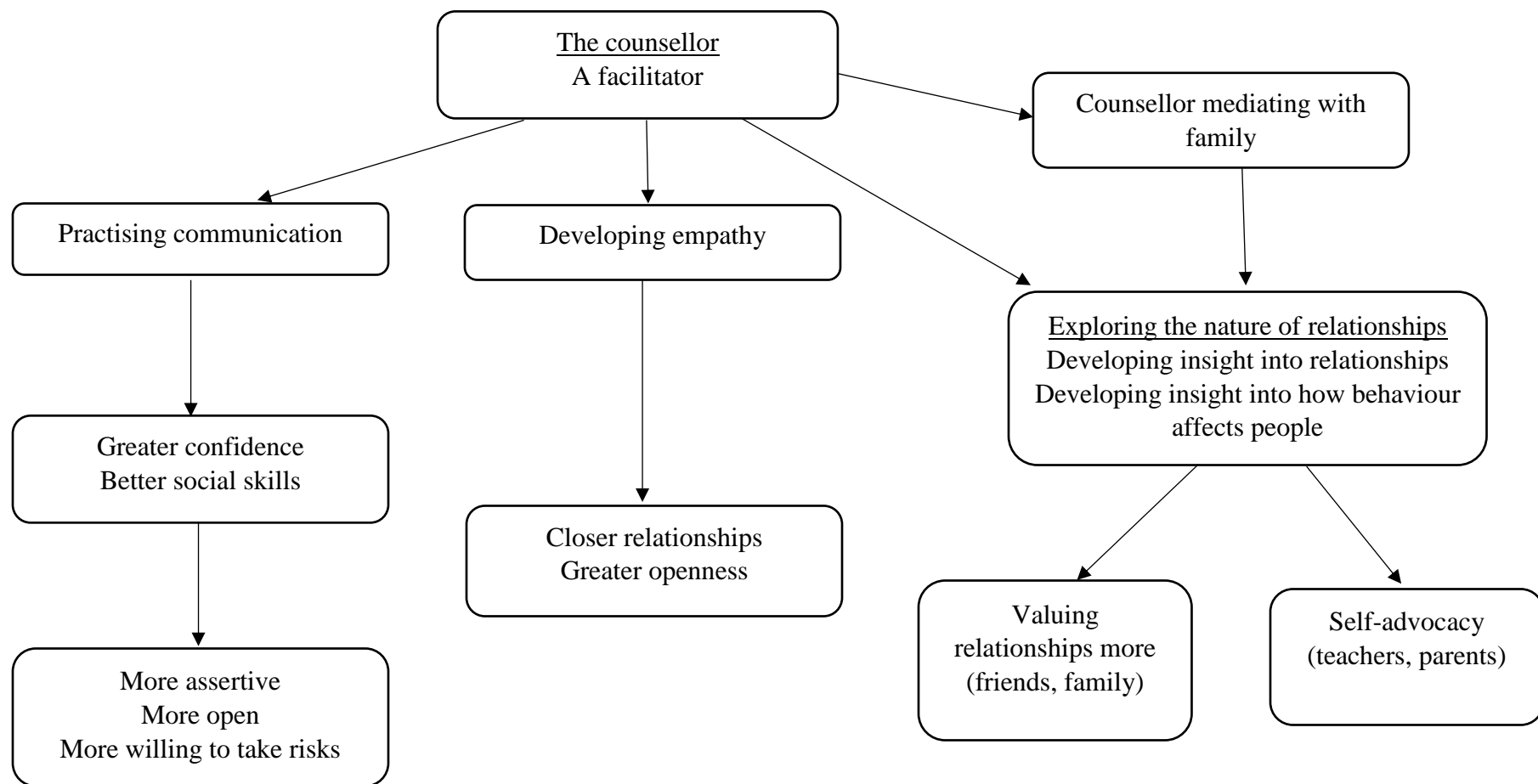


Figure 6.2. Change process: “I’ve been able to connect with more people”: Developing better relationships

Lavik et al. (2018) have suggested that counsellors' relational qualities may help adolescent clients to work with their own emotions, possibly resulting in better emotional regulation, and hence assisting in an important developmental process. The findings of the present study, along with those of previous research, are consistent with a humanistic emphasis on unconditional positive regard and empathy towards the client by the counsellor being a necessary component of counselling for therapeutic change to occur.

Several qualitative studies have found that clients report better emotional regulation, being able to cope with negative emotions more effectively and experiencing catharsis after counselling. Both Cooper (2009) and Griffiths (2013) identified "getting things off one's chest" as a process in SBC, and studies have also reported that talking about emotions leads to relief (Cooper, 2009; Griffiths, 2013; McArthur et al., 2016). Dunne et al. (2000) found that talking and sharing emotions and feeling understood were important affective processes in SBC. Knight et al. (2018) and Lynass et al. (2012) also found that clients who felt listened to and understood were more likely to engage in school counselling.

Students said that, as a result of being able to express their emotions freely, they felt less anxious and more relaxed and they reported several consequences of this. They were more self-accepting, did not dwell on their limitations and were less concerned about the views of other people. Experiencing greater self-acceptance as a result of the counsellor's "valuing attitude" was reported by McArthur et al. (2016, p. 96) in their study of change processes in SBHC. Results from the present study found an increased ability to cope with negative experiences and

emotions, and this came about as a result of being able to express themselves freely, as well as being a result of students' developing more realistic ways of thinking about their situation.

Students reported that they were able to deal with problems more effectively and counsellors also felt that students developed confidence which enabled them to handle problems better. This is a second area, in addition to improved communication, where confidence improved as a result of counselling.

Although there is no direct evidence from this study that counselling has an impact on academic attainment, the outcomes of counselling associated with experiencing positive emotions may lead to improved academic performance. Stress has been associated with poorer academic performance (Schwabe & Wolf, 2010) and Rupani et al. (2012) found that students' school work improved after counselling.

Both clients and students felt that talking about feelings was a crucial part of counselling, partly because students did not have anyone else, especially an adult, who would listen to them. This is consistent with "talking to someone and being listened to" reported by Cooper (2009, p. 145) and Griffiths (2013, p. 24) and may be particularly important for the clients in this study since parents' role in Chinese society may be more authoritarian (Hue, 2016) and hence they may be less open to listening to their children. Also, parents of mid to high socioeconomic status may be less available for their children as they are busy with work commitments.

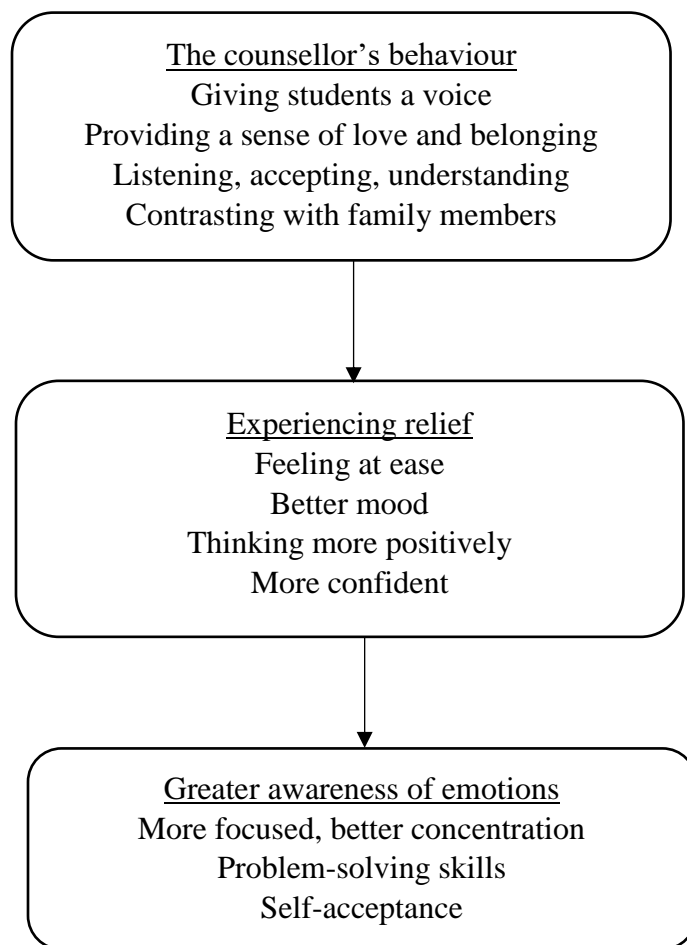


Figure 6.3. Change process: “I guess I feel better about myself”: Experiencing positive emotions and increasing self-efficacy

6.3.4 Overlapping areas in the change processes

The very limited literature on change processes in SBC reports that such processes are “varied and overlapping” (McArthur et al., 2016, p. 96). During the process of data analysis, care was taken to ensure that, as far as possible, the themes were independent and did not overlap (Braun

& Clarke, 2012). There are two areas of overlap in the change processes, however, and these relate to students developing insight and also developing greater resourcefulness and self-efficacy. These components appear in different change processes, though they are manifested in different ways.

In Process 1 (new ways of thinking), students develop insight as a result of interacting with the counsellor and responding to the counsellor's questions or suggestions. Students experience new ways of thinking about problems, become more accepting of their situation and engage in a reappraisal of what is important to them. Insight is also important in Process 2 (developing better relationships). Here, insight is strongly linked to developing empathy, leading to a greater understanding of how their behaviour affects other people, changes in the expectations students have of their friends and family members, and an increase in the value students place on relationships. In the case of Process 1, insight leads to greater optimism, a more positive appraisal of personal difficulties and a willingness to face problems. In Process 2, developing empathy leads to insight into interpersonal relations which leads to greater empowerment and self-efficacy in relationships.

In Process 1 (new ways of thinking), students learn to become more resourceful. For example, they become more accepting of some problems and take a more proactive approach to dealing with others. They become more confident in their ability to handle problems constructively and feel a greater sense of responsibility for their own choices. In Process 3 (experiencing positive emotions and increasing self-efficacy), students learn to become more accepting of their situation, learn to manage stress better and, as a result, experience greater focus and better self-

esteem. In both processes, greater resourcefulness and self-efficacy are experienced, but the precursors of these experiences are different, being either a cognitive process or through experiencing positive emotions in Processes 1 and 3 respectively.

In McArthur et al.'s (2016) study into change process in SBHC, students experienced better relationships as a result of “insight” (p. 94) and also as a result of “improved relational skills” (p. 95). The present study has included both greater insight – strongly related to developing empathy – improved communication skills and greater confidence in communication, into one single process (Process 2: developing better relationships).

6.3.5 Summary: Thematic domain 2

The change processes identified in the present study are broadly consistent with those identified in the literature. Change processes involving the development of insight and awareness lead to positive therapeutic outcomes, and this finding extends our understanding that such cognitive change processes are taking place in counselling with Hong Kong Chinese secondary school students. The present study also lends support to the finding from previous studies that school counsellors can be instrumental in assisting students to develop better relationships and suggests that this can be particularly impactful on the family. This study thus extends the application of previous findings to Hong Kong Chinese students by showing that talking about problems to a counsellor leading to emotional relief is a significant change process in this local setting. The importance of this process may be enhanced by the sociocultural context where students

experience hierarchical relationships where adults are often seen as authority figures. This study's findings suggest that students who experience emotional relief as a result of counselling are better able to function well at school as a consequence of improved concentration and better problem-solving skills. Given the similarity between the findings of the present study and those of previous research, albeit limited, into the change processes taking place in adolescent counselling, these processes appear to have cross cultural validity.

Figure 6.4 shows the therapeutic change processes presented in a single diagram with the activities of the counsellor and student, and the therapeutic outcomes.

6.3.6 The relationship between change processes and counselling modalities

There is evidence that the change processes taking place in SBC are compatible with different theories of counselling. *New ways of thinking* is broadly compatible with a cognitive approach. In the context of a trusting, warm counselling relationship, the counsellor acts as a facilitator to help students to become more aware of their thinking processes and question themselves, leading to a more realistic way of thinking. The so-called third-wave approaches such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), where students are helped to become more accepting of their private psychological experiences, are also consistent with this process.

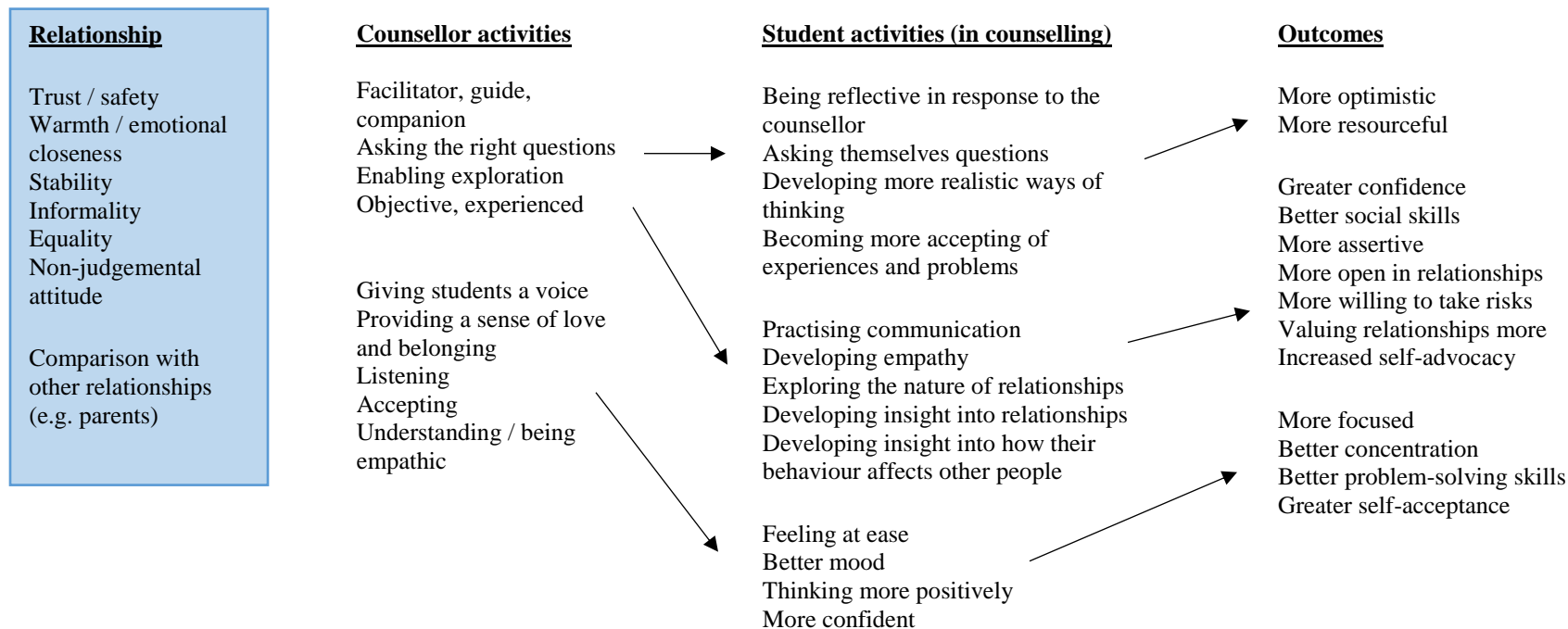


Figure 6.4. Change processes showing the counsellor and student activities and therapeutic outcomes

Developing better relationships contains elements of cognitive, humanistic and systemic approaches. As in *new ways of thinking*, the counsellor facilitates the student's development of greater awareness and insight into relationships. There is also a focus on empathy leading to better understanding of significant people in a student's life, and the student's social and family context are explicitly acknowledged and discussed. Where appropriate, counsellors act as mediators to enhance communication between family members.

Experiencing positive emotions is broadly compatible with humanistic approaches. The counsellor's attitude and ability to provide a warm, accepting space where a student feels understood and safe to express emotions leads to emotional relief, optimism, a better mood and a greater sense of self-acceptance.

There is little evidence that students regarded counselling as a way for them to engage in practical problem-solving. This is surprising, given that both Cooper (2009) and Griffiths (2013) identified problem-solving as a common outcome of SBC and that several studies have concluded that Chinese clients prefer counselling which is oriented towards problem-solving (Cao, 2008; Kuo et al., 2011; Lin, 2001; Wei & Heppner, 2005). It is possible that students found such a great deal of benefit from the other processes taking place that problem-solving was not so important to them. It is also possible that students had other sources of support to enable them to problem-solve. For example, all three of the schools provided extensive academic and pastoral support to students such as home room teachers, heads of year, academic advisors and mentors, which may have provided opportunities for students to engage in problem-solving.

6.4 Modified mid-range theory

The study's findings enable the MRT developed in Chapter 2 to be modified. With particular reference to the summaries given in Sections 6.2.6 and 6.3.5, the following is offered as a modified MRT which accounts for the experiences of the participants more comprehensively.

Familiarity with and access to counsellors and different opportunities to engage with them is possible because of the embeddedness of counselling in the life of the school, leading to counsellors being able to develop relationships with students more easily. Embeddedness also makes it possible for counsellors to work closely with teachers, which is a useful source of information and support, but which also contributes to a lack of trust if the counsellor is seen as being too closely aligned with teachers. Counsellors are able to work with parents; where parents hold more traditional beliefs and behaviours about childhood socialisation involving shaming and punishment, they are less likely to be supportive of counselling.

Sociocultural features – a pathological view of counselling, traditional parental beliefs and behaviours about raising children, and a perception of counsellors as authority figures – and features related to the organisational context of the school – confidentiality concerns in a low-trust and close-knit community, and the dual roles of counsellors – lead to students experiencing significant fears associated with approaching counsellors and hence make it less likely that they will do so.

Building a counselling relationship is predicated on establishing trust, the importance of which is enhanced by the sociocultural and organisational context, where stigma and shame are associated with counselling. The Rogerian conditions of genuineness, positive regard and empathy are essential to building the relationship, which is characterised by informality and equality and in which students feel understood and accepted.

Students experience counsellors as providing significant ongoing social and emotional support as a result of their embeddedness in the school. This is seen positively by students and counsellors, though counsellors also see the dangers of creating dependency. The embeddedness of counselling in the life of the school also leads to limits to the amount of disclosure that can take place, fears about confidentiality and role confusion, limiting the potential outcomes of counselling.

Within the context of a counselling relationship, students experience three therapeutic change processes. The counsellor acts as a facilitator, enabling exploration on the part of the student who, as a result of this exploration, is able to think more realistically and develop greater insight which, in turn, leads to greater optimism and resourcefulness. With the counsellor's facilitation, students are also able to practise communication, develop empathy and develop insight into their own relationships and, as a result of this, they become more open, develop closer relationships, learn to value their relationships more and improve their self-advocacy. Students also respond to the warm, accepting and empathic attitude of the counsellor

and experience catharsis, a better mood and a more positive way of thinking which persists into their lives outside counselling and allows them to be more focused, to concentrate more and be more self-accepting.

6.5 Summary

The macro-processes of counselling are influenced by the sociocultural context and the embeddedness of the counselling service into the school. The former increases the fears students experience when beginning counselling and makes the role of trust more prominent in the development of a counselling relationship. The latter provides an opportunity for the formation of a close counselling relationship and enables counsellors to provide significant social and emotional support. Students regard this as a major benefit of counselling, but counsellors are mindful of the potential for the development of dependency. The therapeutic potential of counselling may be limited due to ongoing confidentiality concerns and a lack of clarity of counsellors' roles in school.

Three significant change processes were identified: *developing insight*, *developing better relationships* and *experiencing positive emotions and increasing self-efficacy*. Through the development of insight, students learn to think more realistically and become more accepting of their problems. This leads to greater optimism and self-efficacy. Students develop better relationships through practising communication and becoming more empathic, leading to increased valuing of, and assertiveness in, their relationships with teachers, family and friends.

Students experience emotional relief as a result of talking to their counsellor and they also report improved concentration. Students do not appear to prefer a more directive style of counselling, and none of the change processes was found to be more significant than the others.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.1 Overview

This chapter summarises the key findings of the study related to the two thematic domains, *relationship in context* and *change processes*. The methodological challenges of using a critical realist approach, and the study's limitations, are discussed. A reflexive discussion of the researcher's role in the project is given. Recommendations for school counsellors are proposed, limitations of the research study are discussed and areas for further scholarly investigation suggested.

7.2 Summary of major findings

The present study investigated the processes taking place in school counselling with Chinese students in Hong Kong schools, and the influence of the of the school setting and the sociocultural context on the counselling experiences of students and counsellors. Two thematic domains were identified: *relationship in context* and *change processes*, which address the research questions.

7.2.1 Relationship in context

The study found that the school counsellors' embeddedness into a school was simultaneously a helpful and an unhelpful factor: embeddedness provided familiarity, easy access to the counsellor and more opportunities to engage, but also limited disclosure due to ongoing confidentiality concerns and role confusion on the part of both the counsellors and students.

The feelings of fear and uncertainty reported in previous studies as students first approach counselling (Binder et al., 2011; Lavik et al., 2018) were magnified by the sociocultural context of Hong Kong, where individuals have been socialised into the belief that sharing information of a personal nature outside the family is inappropriate and even shameful (Ow & Katz, 1999). In addition, mental health issues are rather stigmatised in Hong Kong (Mo & Mak, 2009), and so students sometimes felt it necessary to hide their attendance at counselling from their parents, though they continued to attend because they were deriving so much benefit from it. Students also experienced concerns about confidentiality related to the counsellors' multiple roles and the close-knit nature of the school community. Although counsellors did recognise the fears experienced by students, they seemed not to realise what a significant problem these fears represented.

Students were more positive about approaching a counsellor when they had some prior experience of counselling or when friends or family were supportive of their attending counselling, a finding consistent with previous research which has reported that individuals are

more likely to seek help when they know someone who has previously done so (Vogel et al., 2007).

The study's findings suggest that relationship building is an essential process which provides a source of ongoing social and emotional support experienced by students, consistent with previous research (Knight et al., 2018). Previous studies have emphasised the importance of developing trust in the formation of a counselling relationship (Lavik et al., 2018; Prior, 2012; Westergaard, 2013), and the present study's findings suggest that developing trust is a significant precursor of relationship building with the counsellor and that the importance of trust is heightened by the Hong Kong sociocultural context. Students developed trust in the counsellor over time as they experienced that information was not disclosed to other people, and the disclosure of personal information in the counselling relationship became easier over time.

Counsellors' personal qualities and behaviour led to the development of trust, which in turn allowed the formation of a deeper relationship characterised by stability, informality and equality. Several qualities of the counsellor were found to be essential to students in building the counselling relationship: a warm, accepting and non-judgemental attitude, and a sense that the counsellor cares about them personally, communicated through the counsellor listening to clients, and trustworthiness.

While recognising that the long-term support counselling provided was beneficial, counsellors used more negative language to describe this support, however: students described their counsellors as a "safety net," whereas counsellors felt that being a "shelter" for students was not

helpful since the counsellor could become a “crutch” or a “place to hide” and that counselling should ideally be a shorter-term intervention which enabled students to manage problems more independently.

There was a tension between the expectations of students and the beliefs of counsellors about what constitutes their role, and this seemed to be indicative of a lack of role clarity: students thought that some issues could not be raised as a result of the counsellor’s dual roles, and also that dual roles could make interactions with the counsellor awkward and confusing. Counsellors felt that their dual roles required them to adopt different types of behaviour in different situations.

7.2.2 Change processes

Three change processes were identified in this study. These change processes are not independent from each other and overlap somewhat.

The role of the counsellor as a facilitator in change processes was fundamental. Previous research has suggested that adult Chinese clients in counselling may prefer a more structured and directive style of counselling (Cao, 2008; Kuo et al., 2011; Ng & James, 2013), but the present study found that students did not appear to value advice giving and preferred a style of communication which helped them to think and explore.

Counsellors' facilitated students' exploration of their situation and, as a result of this, students learned to think more realistically and became more accepting of their problems. This led to students becoming better at coping with negative emotions, engaging in better self-care and experiencing greater self-efficacy. Previous studies have found that change processes involving cognitive reappraisal and the development of new insight are associated with helpful therapeutic outcomes (Crocket et al., 2015; McArthur et al., 2016), and this study extends these findings to Chinese adolescents. There is no evidence from this study, however, that cognitive processes are more therapeutically significant than other processes.

Developing better relationships was perhaps the most impactful outcome of counselling and could be transformative for both the student and the family. Counselling provided a safe space where students could develop communication skills and become more socially confident. Students formed better relationships with parents, teachers and friends as a result of these interactions in counselling. In particular, they became more confident and capable of self-advocacy in relationships. Students found that developing empathy also helped them to become more accepting of others and to value their relationships more and that counselling allowed them to develop confidence and skills in communication which led to greater self-advocacy in relationships.

Students experienced positive emotions in counselling, and this led to a greater acceptance of their experience, better emotional regulation and better self-care. Feeling better in counselling led to more optimism and self-acceptance in daily life. Previous researchers have speculated that Asian clients may be more comfortable with counselling that focuses on cognitions rather than

talking about emotions (Kim et al., 2001), and the present study does not support this suggestion. Previous studies have found that talking to a counsellor about problems leads to emotional relief (Cooper, 2009; Griffiths, 2013; McArthur et al., 2016), and this study's findings are consistent with these and suggest that affective change pathways in counselling are important and lead to helpful therapeutic outcomes, including improved concentration and better problem-solving skills, in Hong Kong Chinese students.

7.3 Reflexive discussion

Valid qualitative research – that is, research which is trustworthy and credible – recognises the subjectivity of the researcher and incorporates this subjectivity into the research process at every stage (Smith, 2006). As such, researcher subjectivity is not a weakness to be overcome but a resource to be exploited (Clarke & Braun, 2018). The present study is framed within a critical realist paradigm, where the researcher's role in the interpretation of data is fully acknowledged: while generative mechanisms exist at the real level of ontology, the researcher's role in inferring how these structures operate given certain contextual conditions is an essential component of the methodology. Smith (2006) describes the reflexivity on the part of the researcher as a recognition that data are collected and analysed with a “constant scrutiny of ‘what I know’ and ‘how I know it’” (p. 210). Hence, reflexivity is at the heart of credibility in qualitative research and there follows a reflexive discussion of my own place in the research process.

Throughout the project, I have tried to keep in mind my own values and perspectives and the ways in which these have shaped the project, in its conception and design and throughout its execution. Certainly, my approach has been influenced by my experience as a counsellor, teacher and school administrator in Hong Kong, and the project's aims reflect my own view of what is important – a need for greater counselling support in schools; an interest in the ways in which culture influences counselling experience; and a desire to see more emphasis on humanistic and qualitative approaches to both counselling practice and research, where power is distributed and voice is given to clients and research participants.

My own desire to find positive results may have influenced the interpretation of the data. Finding relationships between various aspects of participants' experience and drawing conclusions about the influence of context is the focus of this work, and the critical realist process of retrodution is a creative process which, as Fletcher (2017) notes, sometimes requires the researcher to “elaborate upon (or deviate from) participants' own interpretations in order to ‘provide fuller or more adequate interpretations’ of reality” (p. 190). The generative mechanisms about which inferences are being made are real, however, and keeping conclusions grounded in the data is essential. Discussions with colleagues who were not so invested in the study, particularly through the process of auditing, discussed in Chapter 3, assisted greatly in forcing me to justify my conclusions more convincingly and present plausible explanations based on the data. Recognising and explicitly acknowledging the provisional nature of the conclusions through the development of a modified MRT has also been helpful in this regard.

Giving voice to participants was an explicit aim of the project and several measures were taken to address this. The semi-structured interview questions constituted a framework for the interviews but the interviews themselves were all quite different since I wanted participants to speak about what they personally felt was important. The interview locations were all very private and comfortable. Participants' responses to the interview questions may have been influenced by their knowledge of my own professional experience and position, particularly in the school where I was part of the senior leadership team at the time the interviews took place. A clear power differential existed between me and the participants, and this may have been increased by the sociocultural context. In consequence, adolescents over whom, technically, I had authority, may have been less candid in their responses than they might otherwise have been. I was very clear that participation was voluntary and spent some time with participants discussing the purpose of the project and explaining the confidentiality of the data. My sense was that participants were generally willing to share openly and did not self-censor to a very great extent, though of course I have no way of knowing this for sure. I wanted the participants to feel empowered and to have a voice in the research process, but my positional authority may have limited this possibility. Participants at the other two schools probably did not know about my background and position at the other school: I introduced myself as a researcher with experience in schools and only gave more details if asked. Participants were given the opportunity to comment on the findings and were invited to discuss the project with me after data analysis was largely complete, and I was very open to incorporating their comments into the analysis, though none of the participants wished to do so. Other measures could have been taken to reduce the power differential which existed. I could, for example, have included participants in discussions about the project's aims and design, although this might have been logistically difficult given the

busy school environment. In summary, there was a power difference between me as the researcher and the participants and, although I took steps to reduce this, it is impossible to tell how effective these steps were: all that can be said is that a power difference remained. Smith (2006) notes that such a power difference cannot be fully eliminated.

Incorporating the perspectives of both clients and counsellors from three different schools was an attempt to give voice to a range of different participants and to ensure that no single group's voice was privileged over any other.

I suffered from some degree of isolation in the project since, by the nature of doctoral work, I was the sole researcher collecting and analysing data. Although data was shared and discussed with other colleagues from time to time, I was not part of a research group and did not collaborate significantly with others. Discussions with my supervisors and other colleagues were helpful in making my own assumptions and 'blind spots' more explicit, and I also had interesting and challenging conversations with other colleagues, not all with a background in counselling or psychology, which helped me to clarify my own role in the research process.

Finally, the manner in which the project is written up has been a matter of deliberate choice. Smith (2006) notes that most research is presented in the form of "realist tales," where participants' views are emphasised, and the researcher's voice is largely absent: the "measured intellectual style of the text" is not "contaminated by personal bias" (p. 211). Some research is written up as "confessional tales," which emphasise the voice of the researcher and describe the process through which the researcher has passed and the ways in which s/he has been

transformed by the research process. Given the realist framework in which the project was conducted, my choice has been to write in a more realist style. Certainly, this project has taught me a great deal both as a researcher and as a counsellor, and one weakness of the project is that the write-up does not reflect this personal journey very well. Smith (2006) notes that much of the researcher's journey is lost in the final write-up of many projects, and this is the case in the present study: very little of the material from the many meetings and informal conversations which took place and the reflective memos taken over the course of the project appear in the final write-up.

7.4. Value of the study

The present study adds to the literature in several ways. A need was identified for more research into change processes in counselling with adolescents (Fedewa et al., 2016). This is one of the first studies to research this area, and the first to investigate SBC in Hong Kong. In addition, the study takes into account the ways in which the sociocultural context and the embeddedness of counselling influence the change processes taking place, addressing the need for a more comprehensive and diverse evidence base in Hong Kong school counselling (Yuen et al., 2014). The perspectives of both students and counsellors are taken into account, a feature which is absent from most research into SBC. Further, the study has shown that SBC is valued by students and so raises the profile of counselling, a professional activity which has been described recently as being “in a state of nascent development” (Lam & Yeung, 2017). Methodologically, a focus on both causative mechanisms and context was achieved by the operationalisation of critical

realism using thematic analysis. There are few studies which attempt to operationalise a critical realist approach, and so the present study addresses the call made by some researchers in the field to add to methodological diversity (McLaughlin et al., 2013) and indicates that such a methodology is workable and can provide novel insights.

A mid-range theory of SBC has been developed which takes into account both macro- and micro-counselling processes and the influence of the sociocultural context and the embeddedness of counselling services. Key features of the MRT are as follows.

First, the study shows that the embeddedness of SBC in the organisation of the school influences the way counselling is experienced by both students and counsellors. The benefits of embeddedness – ease of access, familiarity and more opportunity to engage with counselling – are offset by students’ confidentiality concerns and role confusion on the part of both students and counsellors. Hence, social-emotional support appears to be emphasised over specific therapeutic work and is often perceived by students as beneficial and long-term, though counsellors are aware of the potential for creating dependent relationships.

Second, specific features of the sociocultural context in which SBC occurs have a significant impact on students’ and counsellors’ perception and experience of counselling and the development of a counselling relationship. These features are the tendency to see mental health issues in a pathological way, the beliefs and behaviours of parents related to childhood socialisation, the perception of counsellors as authority figures, and concerns about confidentiality related to a small community in the context of a low-trust society. One feature of

school organisation – the multiple roles of counsellors – also has an impact on students’ and counsellors’ perception and experience of counselling by creating a lack of role clarity, perceived by both students and counsellors.

Third, the influence of sociocultural features manifests in several ways. Barriers to counselling are amplified in the Chinese sociocultural context. The study also suggests that parents who have more traditional Chinese beliefs and behaviours around parenting are less supportive of counselling and may constitute an additional barrier to students attending counselling. The establishment of trust as an essential precursor to the formation of a positive counselling relationship is very prominent.

Fourth, the study shows that the change processes experienced by Hong Kong Chinese students are broadly similar to those reported elsewhere and that the sociocultural context has some moderating influence. Students prefer a less directive style of counselling, a finding which is at odds with research into counselling with adult Chinese clients. A strong counselling relationship is essential for therapeutic change to occur and the Rogerian conditions of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard are essential components of this relationship. The role of the counsellor is key in all change processes. Improved relationships with a student’s family can be particularly impactful, given the importance of family in the Hong Kong sociocultural context.

7.5 Recommendations for school counsellors and administrators

One of the key features of a critical realist approach is an emphasis on the development of practical recommendations for effecting helpful change in a social context (Fletcher, 2017). One aim of the study was to provide recommendations regarding practice for counsellors working with local Hong Kong Chinese students in school settings, and policy recommendations for school administrators. The voice of participants – both students and counsellors – in SBC was an important component of developing these recommendations, which are presented below.

First, the role of school counsellors is broader than that of counsellors in community settings. Indeed, the therapeutic role of school counsellors is not more important than their role as a source of social and emotional support for students. Schools should, therefore, be clear about the role of school counsellors in relation to other pastoral care roles in the school.

Second, the embedded nature of school counselling provides benefits such as greater ease of access to the service and greater understanding of students' situations by counsellors, but also limits the support that can be provided due to confidentiality concerns. It also appears that significant role confusion exists about the work of school counsellors on the part of students, parents, teachers and even counsellors themselves. Hence, the role of counsellors should be clearly defined and understood by administrators, teachers and the counsellors, and this understanding communicated to all stakeholders. In particular, given the hierarchical nature of Hong Kong society, it may be helpful for counsellors not to have a teaching role, since teachers seem to be associated with authority and discipline. The centrality of trust as a driver of

relationship building is a key finding of the present study, and greater perceived independence from the school may increase the ease with which students feel able to trust their counsellors. This recommendation has implications for schools in Hong Kong where counselling is often carried out by teachers with an additional ‘guidance’ role.

Third, counsellors tend to underestimate the barriers which exist to students attending counselling as a result of the sociocultural context and the embeddedness of counsellors into the school. In particular, the cultural tendency to keep problems within the family and to experience loss of face and shame when engaging in counselling seems to be magnified by the traditional attitudes of parents, and so a greater focus on parent education may be helpful. The normalisation of counselling within school communities may be addressed by giving attention to psychoeducation for students, parents, teachers and school leaders, and embedding a focus on mental wellbeing into school strategic planning. Counsellors are well placed to act as mediators in relationships between students and parents and may assist in relationship building between parents and their children.

Fourth, the support of teachers is important to counsellors’ effectiveness, and counsellors can develop good relationships with teachers by being available to give them advice and support in their work which, in turn, enables a better understanding of counselling. This said, counsellors need to manage the perception students have of them as being part of the school staff and hence as authority figures, since this can limit trust and hence therapeutic effectiveness.

Fifth, there is strong evidence that the Rogerian core conditions are necessary for therapeutic outcomes to occur. The core competencies in relationship building are adopting a warm, non-judgemental attitude, showing genuineness, partly through appropriate and limited self-disclosure, listening to students and demonstrating understanding and developing trust through being clear about and adhering to confidentiality standards.

Finally, counselling is informed by Western models of individual actualisation, and a focus on personal development within the context of community and family may be helpful. Counselling which is sensitive to and incorporates indigenous beliefs and practices (Chong & Liu, 2002; Lee, 2002) may be considered.

7.6 Limitations of the study

One of the study's aims was to add to the methodological diversity in the literature on SBC. Critical realism is particularly suited to understanding the mechanisms through which change occurs and the ways in which context influences these mechanisms in social systems (Pawson, 2006). The operationalisation of a critical realist approach using thematic analysis brought the processes taking place in counselling, and the sociocultural and organisational contexts which influenced them, into focus. The application of the critical realist approach did lead to several methodological challenges, however.

First, there is evidence for the change processes presented in this study, and also for the ways in which context influences the processes taking place in counselling, but a comprehensive and definitive account of the extent to which the change processes proposed lead to the outcomes described is not possible. This has been called the “attribution paradox” by Marchal et al. (2010, p. 11). The findings of a critical realist study are not comparable to those of a controlled experiment, the latter not being possible in such a complex social system where reported experiences are a result of *emergence* (Bhaskar, 2013), but the findings may stimulate researchers and counsellors to pay closer attention to the mechanisms proposed and the ways they are influenced by context in the form of the modified MRT.

Second, the relationship between the elements of the change process and the context is often unclear. For example, a contextual element may be essential for a particular outcome and so may be regarded as part of a mechanism. To give an example, the study found that the reluctance of students to engage in counselling is a result of elements of the sociocultural context such as taboos around counselling in a low-trust and close-knit community, but these taboos might also be considered as an element of the mechanism operating to inhibit engaging in counselling. The challenge of disentangling contextual factors from components of causative mechanisms may require an investigation of and comparison with the change processes taking place in SBC in other cultural and organisational contexts.

In addition to these methodological issues, the study had several other, practical, limitations.

First, the population of students interviewed was ethnically very homogeneous. All the students were Hong Kong Chinese. While this homogeneity makes transferability of the study's findings possible to other similar contexts, the lack of ethnic diversity makes such transferability to other settings more difficult. Hong Kong's educational landscape is diverse, and it may be the case that students in schools with different ethnic groups of students may experience counselling in different ways. The small number of schools may also limit the transferability of findings since the schools and their counselling services may have special or unique features.

Second, there was little homogeneity between the counsellors, with a mix of male and female, Chinese and Western, different ages and a wide range of experience. Three of the counsellors were social workers with some additional training and experience in counselling, and one of the counsellors did not have a master's degree in counselling. There was some variation between the schools in terms of the way change processes were experienced by students and it may be that this variation is associated with differences between counsellors.

Third, the study did not control for counselling modalities. None of the counsellors adhered to a particular theoretical orientation and instead they reported using various approaches in their therapeutic work with students. These approaches included cognitive behavioural therapy, choice theory / reality therapy, person-centred therapy, Satir counselling, narrative therapy, solution focused brief therapy and mindfulness-based therapy. Since the interviews with participants were all carried out after, and not during, counselling, it was not possible to carry out any investigation into the types of counselling taking place through recording sessions, for example. Hence, it is

not clear if the application of techniques associated with particular approaches was associated with the different change processes identified in the study.

Finally, several sources of bias may have been present in the research design. The strategy of recruiting students by asking counsellors to approach possible participants may have introduced bias into the sample of participants since counsellors may have approached students who might have had more positive experiences of counselling or were more open to speaking about their experience. The researcher's bias in wishing to see positive results may have influenced the interpretation of the data, although steps were taken to reduce this, primarily the adoption of a reflexive stance and ongoing professional discussions about the extent to which conclusions were grounded in the data.

7.7 Implications for further research

The findings of the present study suggest several possibilities for future research. First, the study found evidence of gender difference in the way young people experience change processes. Girls may find *developing better relationships* to be a more significant change process than boys, whereas boys may experience *new ways of thinking* and *experiencing positive emotions* as more significant. This may be a result of differential gender socialisation, where boys may have fewer opportunities to express emotion and may not regard such emotional expression as socially appropriate or acceptable and so may experience emotional catharsis in counselling as more impactful. Girls, on the other hand, may regard relationships to be more important than boys, and

so may find improved relationships a more significant change process in counselling. However, the study did not find very large differences between boys and girls, and the small number of participants makes it hard to draw definite conclusions. Further research could be carried out into differences in the way boys and girls experience SBC change processes.

Second, further research could investigate the change processes taking place specifically in humanistic, cognitive, systemic or other approaches to counselling. Differences and similarities between these approaches would add further to our understanding of SBC.

Third, the present study looked into the embeddedness of counselling into the school as one aspect of school organisation, but future research could investigate the ways in which school culture influences the processes taking place in counselling. It may also be possible to investigate the impact of specific cultural artefacts in a more systematic way. For example, the perception of counsellors as authority figures may inhibit students from attending counselling, but deference to authority figures may engender a stronger relationship between counsellors and students (Kim et al., 2001).

Fourth, the study could be extended to younger students, who may experience the counselling process differently from older students.

Fifth, the present study took into account the perspectives of students and counsellors and found that the attitudes of parents and teachers had an important influence on the way counselling was

experienced. Future research could investigate the ways parents and teachers perceive counselling and their influence on its effectiveness in more detail.

Sixth, the study found evidence that affective pathways to change led to better concentration and problem-solving at school. While there was no evidence that these outcomes led directly to improved academic improvement, it may be the case that counselling does have an impact on academic results and this could be an area for further investigation.

Finally, there may be differences in the ways counselling is experienced by adult and adolescent clients. For example, previous research has found that Chinese adults prefer a more directive style of counselling (Cao, 2008; Kuo et al., 2011; Ng & James, 2013) whereas the present study found no evidence that adolescents preferred this counselling style, and this is another potential area for further study.

7.8 Summary

Two thematic domains were identified from the data collected: *relationship in context* and *change processes*. The first of these domains emphasises the importance of the sociocultural context and the school setting, and the ways in which these features influence every aspect of counselling. The second describes the change processes which take place as students undergo counselling and explains how these processes lead to therapeutic outcomes. The use of the critical realist framework was associated with methodological challenges, and the study suffered

from a number of other limitations. Researcher subjectivity was a factor at every stage in the processes of carrying out the study, and a focus on reflexivity sought to ensure that this subjectivity was a resource rather than a problem to be managed. The examination of the first-hand reflections of the two key stakeholder groups in the study allows us to understand better the obstacles and rewards involved at different stages of school-based counselling in Hong Kong, and to provide policymakers and mental health professionals with a window into the views of those directly engaged in local educational counselling. It is hoped that the lessons learned from the present study will help to draw attention to the potential of school counselling to address the significant burden of mental health issues experienced by young people in Hong Kong.

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Appendix 1 Themes derived from student interviews

Theme (frequency)	Sub-theme (frequency)	Central organising concept
Hopes and fears (24)	Fears and barriers (21)	Students had hopes and expectations about what counselling could do for them, but they also had several fears which were significant to them and inhibited them from going to counselling.
	Hopes and expectations (16)	
A special kind of relationship (24)	Developing a trusting, informal relationship (24)	Over time, students came to see counselling as a helpful resource which was surprisingly helpful, and which was driven by the development of a stable and reliable relationship characterised by trust, informality and equality where students felt accepted and understood. The counsellor became a source of ongoing support which students saw as a ‘safety net.’
	An ongoing source of support (24)	
	A limited source of support (21)	
New ways of thinking (21)	The counsellor as catalyst (21)	Counselling enabled students to think in new ways about or gain new perspectives on their problems, and hence to find creative ways to approach these problems. The counsellor was instrumental in bringing about these changes in ways of thinking.
	Developing new perspectives (17)	
Developing better relationships (21)	Collaborative exploration (15)	Students and counsellors collaboratively engaged in experiences which helped students empathise more with others, develop a better understanding of their relationships and feel more comfortable and confident about communicating with other people. This had a positive impact on family and other relationships.
	Improved relationships (20)	
Experiencing positive emotions (21)	Feeling better (20)	Students felt better during counselling and this led to greater emotional stability This in turn enabled students to have a better experience of school and manage their academic work more effectively.
	A better experience of school (15)	

Appendix 2 Themes derived from counsellor interviews

Theme (frequency)	Sub-theme (frequency)	Central organising concept
A transformative relationship (8)	Building a relationship (8)	Initially, students were apprehensive about counselling since they did not understand the nature of counselling and had some misconceptions about it. Over time, students developed a trusting relationship in which they felt accepted and cared for and which became the key driver of change. This relationship often became a long-term source of support which was helpful but could create dependency.
	A caring relationship (8)	
	A long-term source of support (8)	
A positive and beneficial experience for students (8)	Gaining insight or new perspectives (8)	The counsellor acted as a facilitator to help the student gain transformative insights which led to greater self-acceptance, increased self-confidence and the ability to problem-solve. Counselling helped students to feel better and helped them to develop better communication, which in turn led to improved relationships.
	Developing confidence (8)	
	Practical help or problem solving (8)	
	Feeling better (8)	
	Better relationships (6)	
A limited source of support (8)	Misconceptions and negative perceptions (8)	Some students were resistant to counselling because they felt labelled or stigmatised or that counselling was related to discipline, and so counselling was a 'last resort.' Fears related to confidentiality inhibited disclosure and hence counselling had a limited impact. A busy and rigid timetable and a focus on academic matters made it hard for counsellors to schedule appointments, heavy caseloads, administrative work and a lack of training also limited what counsellors could achieve. Misunderstanding and poor support from teachers and parents could also limit the effectiveness of counselling.
	A negative experience of counselling (8)	
	Limiting factors to our work as school counsellors (8)	
A wider role in the community (8)	A wider role with parents (8)	Being part of the wider school community allowed counsellors to develop a better understanding of students' experience of school and hence to have a deeper connection with them. The counselling service was an important and necessary part of the school and provided value to students who did not have other support or who were experiencing crisis. Counsellors' work with parents helped students to experience better family relationships.
	A wider role in the school community (8)	
	An important part of the school community (8)	



Appendix 3

Focus questions used in the student interviews

Initiating counselling

1. Can you tell me about what led you to start counselling?
2. What were your thoughts about counselling before you started?
3. Can you tell me about any expectations you had of counselling before you started?
4. How did you feel about going to see a counsellor for the first time?

The counselling experience

1. How did your feelings about counselling change as time went on?
2. What do you think was helpful about going to counselling?
3. Was there anything about your experience of counselling that you didn't like or you felt was unhelpful?
4. Do you think you went through stages of counselling experience?

The outcomes of counselling

1. What changes, if any, have you noticed in yourself since your counselling started?
2. Has anything changed for the better for you since your counselling started?
3. Has anything changed for the worse for you since your counselling started?
4. Is there anything that you wanted to change that hasn't since your counselling started?
5. How important or significant to you personally do you think that these changes have been?
6. For each change, how likely do you think it would have been without counselling?
7. In what ways have these changes been significant in your life?
8. What kinds of things about the counselling have been unhelpful, negative or disappointing for you?

The processes bringing about change

1. In general, what do you think has caused the various changes you described? In other words, what do you think might have brought them about?
2. Were there things in the counselling which were difficult but still OK or perhaps helpful? What were they?
3. Did anything get in the way of counselling or stop change from happening?
4. How and why did you end counselling?

Appendix 4

Focus questions used in the counsellor interviews

From your experience of counselling students in this school:

Initiating counselling

1. Why do you think students come to counselling?
2. What do students think about counselling before they start?
3. What expectations do students have of counselling?
4. How do students feel about going to see a counsellor for the first time?

The counselling experience

1. How do students' feelings about counselling change as they have counselling?
2. What do you think students find helpful about going to counselling?
3. Do you think there is anything about students' experience of counselling that they don't like or that they feel is unhelpful, negative or disappointing?
4. Do you think students go through stages in their counselling experience?
5. Would you describe students' counselling experience as linear, cyclical or in some other way?

The outcomes of counselling

1. What changes do you think students experience as a result of counselling?
2. What kind of things change for the better as a result of counselling?
3. What kind of things change for the worse as a result of counselling?
4. Are there things that students want to change in counselling but don't?
5. How important or significant to the students do you think that these changes are?
6. How likely do you think it would be for students to experience these changes without counselling?
7. In what ways are these changes significant to the students?

The processes bringing about change

1. In general, what do you think has caused the various changes you described? In other words, what do you think might have brought them about?
2. Are there things in counselling which were difficult but still OK or perhaps helpful? What are they?
3. Is anything missing from students' experience of counselling?
4. Do you have any suggestions for us, regarding counselling or the research?

Appendix 5

Consent Form and Information Sheet for SCHOOLS

THE EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Department of Psychology

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH (FOR SCHOOL)

Change processes in school-based counselling.

My school hereby consents to participate in the captioned research supervised by Dr Wai-Kai Hou and conducted by Mr Mark Harrison, who is a student in the Department of Psychology in The Education University of Hong Kong.

I understand that information obtained from this research may be used in future research and may be published. However, our right to privacy will be retained, i.e., the personal details of my students/teachers/staff will not be revealed.

The procedure as set out in the **attached** information sheet has been fully explained. I understand the benefits and risks involved. My students'/teachers'/staff's participation in the project are voluntary.

I acknowledge that we have the right to question any part of the procedure and can withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

Signature:

Name of Principal/Delegate*:

(Prof/Dr/Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss*)

Post:

Name of School:

Date:

(* please delete as appropriate)

INFORMATION SHEET

Change processes in school-based counselling

Your school is invited to participate in a project supervised by Dr Hou Wai-Kai and conducted by Mr Mark Harrison, respectively a staff member and a student at the Department of Psychology in The Education University of Hong Kong.

The aim of this research project is to investigate the outcomes of counselling which takes place in a school setting and the ways in which these outcomes come about through the counselling process.

Students at your school are being asked to participate because they are undergoing, or have recently undergone, a series of counselling sessions.

Around 20 to 30 individuals will be taking part in this study. Contact details have been provided by a staff member at your school who has oversight of the counselling service. Students will be asked to meet one researcher for an interview, lasting between 20 and 40 minutes. The interview will take place at the school and will be conducted in a confidential setting. A recording of the interview will be taken, stored securely and deleted at the end of the project. No other person will be present during the interview. Following the interview, no further participation will be required of the students.

Through participating, you will be contributing to research which may benefit students at your school or others who have a counselling service.. There are no risks to you or your students by participating in this research. Your students'/teachers'/staff's participation are voluntary. They have every right to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. All information related to your students/teachers/staff will remain confidential, and will be identifiable by codes known only to the researcher. Results of the research will be presented in a thesis and a summary provided to the school. No individual will be identifiable in either of these documents.

If you would like to obtain more information about this study, please contact Mr Mark Harrison at telephone number or his supervisor Dr Hou Wai-Kai at telephone number

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research study, please do not hesitate to contact the Human Research Ethics Committee by email at hrec@eduhk.hk or by mail to Research and Development Office, The Education University of Hong Kong.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study.

Mark Harrison

Principal Investigator

Appendix 6

Consent Form and Information Sheet for PARTICIPANTS (Students)

THE EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Department of Psychology

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Change processes in school-based counselling.

I _____ hereby consent to participate in the captioned research supervised by Dr Wai-Kai Hou and conducted by Mr Mark Harrison, who is a student at the Department of Psychology in The Education University of Hong Kong.

I understand that information obtained from this research may be used in future research and may be published. However, my right to privacy will be retained, i.e., my personal details will not be revealed.

The procedure as set out in the **attached** information sheet has been fully explained. I understand the benefits and risks involved. My participation in the project is voluntary.

I acknowledge that I have the right to question any part of the procedure and can withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

Name of participant: _____

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

INFORMATION SHEET

Change processes in school-based counselling.

You are invited to participate in a project supervised by Dr Hou Wai-Kai and conducted by Mr Mark Harrison, who are staff / students of the Department of Psychology in The Education University of Hong Kong.

The aim of this research project is to investigate the outcomes of counselling which takes place in a school setting and the ways in which these outcomes come about through the counselling process.

You are being asked to participate because you are undergoing, or have recently undergone, a series of counselling sessions at your school.

Around 20 to 30 individuals will be taking part in this study. Your contact details have been provided by a staff member at your school who has oversight of the counselling service. If you decide to participate in the study, you will be asked to meet one researcher for an interview, lasting between 20 and 40 minutes. The interview will take place at your school and will be conducted in a confidential setting. A recording of the interview will be taken, stored securely and deleted at the end of the project. No other person will be present during the interview. Following the interview, no further participation will be required.

Through participating, you will be contributing to research which may benefit students at your school or others who have a counselling service, though there may be no direct benefit to yourself. There are no risks to you by participating in this research. Your participation in the project is voluntary. You have every right to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. All information related to you will remain confidential, and will be identifiable by codes known only to the researcher. Results of the research will be presented in a thesis and a summary provided to the school. No individual will be identifiable in either of these documents.

If you would like to obtain more information about this study, please contact Mr Mark Harrison at telephone number or his supervisor Dr Hou Wai-Kai at telephone number

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research study, please do not hesitate to contact the Human Research Ethics Committee by email at hrec@eduhk.hk or by mail to Research and Development Office, The Education University of Hong Kong.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study.

Mark Harrison

Principal Investigator

Appendix 7

Consent Form and Information Sheet for PARTICIPANTS (Counsellors)

THE EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Department of Psychology

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Change processes in school-based counselling.

I _____ hereby consent to participate in the captioned research supervised by Dr Wai-Kai Hou and conducted by Mr Mark Harrison, who is a student at the Department of Psychology in The Education University of Hong Kong.

I understand that information obtained from this research may be used in future research and may be published. However, my right to privacy will be retained, i.e., my personal details will not be revealed.

The procedure as set out in the **attached** information sheet has been fully explained. I understand the benefits and risks involved. My participation in the project is voluntary.

I acknowledge that I have the right to question any part of the procedure and can withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

Name of participant: _____

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

INFORMATION SHEET

Change processes in school-based counselling.

You are invited to participate in a project supervised by Dr Hou Wai-Kai and conducted by Mr Mark Harrison, who are staff / students of the Department of Psychology in The Education University of Hong Kong.

The aim of this research project is to investigate the outcomes of counselling which takes place with school-aged clients and the ways in which these outcomes come about through the counselling process. You are being asked to participate because you are a counsellor who works with school-aged clients.

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be asked to meet one researcher for an interview, lasting between 20 and 40 minutes. The interview will be conducted in a confidential setting. A recording of the interview will be taken, stored securely and deleted at the end of the project. No other person will be present during the interview. Following the interview, no further participation will be required.

Through participating, you will be contributing to research which may benefit students at your school or others which have a counselling service, though there may be no direct benefit to yourself. There are no risks to you by participating in this research. Your participation in the project is voluntary. You have every right to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. All information related to you will remain confidential, and will be identifiable by codes known only to the researcher. Results of the research will be presented in a thesis and a summary provided to the school. No individual will be identifiable in either of these documents.

If you would like to obtain more information about this study, please contact Mr Mark Harrison at telephone number or his supervisor Dr Hou Wai-Kai at telephone number . If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research study, please do not hesitate to contact the Human Research Ethics Committee by email at hrec@eduhk.hk or by mail to Research and Development Office, The Education University of Hong Kong.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study.

Mark Harrison

Principal Investigator