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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY OF CLIENT EXPERIENCES OF RECEIVING A HUMANISTICALLY-ORIENTED THERAPEUTIC LETTER BETWEEN COUNSELING SESSIONS FROM THEIR COUNSELOR (380 pp.)

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The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experiences of clients who receive a humanistically-oriented letter from their counselor during the therapy relationship. The primary research question was: What are the experiences of clients receiving a therapeutic letter written by their counselor from a humanistic perspective of relatedness during the counseling relationship? Six clients participated in a series of formal interviews regarding their experience of receiving a counseling letter. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed utilizing Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental approach to phenomenological research. Themes obtained from the analysis revealed that there is a common essential experience relative to clients who receive a humanistically-oriented counseling letter from their therapist between counseling sessions. No qualitative studies were located in the research regarding the experiences of clients who receive a counseling letter from their therapist between counseling sessions in a mental health setting. The findings in this study have relevance for counselor preparation programs and clinical practice. Limitations to this particular study were discussed and suggestions for future research were provided.
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To my children, Oliver, Tulie, and Sawyer, “I feel sad when I think about how often daddy had to be away and how much of your lives I have missed out on. I look forward to sitting at the kitchen table with you at nighttime and eating ice cream and gluten-free donuts together and tucking you into bed with stories during the week. Weekends just never seemed like they were enough. Thank you for your blown kisses through the window as I left on all those mornings. Daddy never washed any of them off his face.”

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CHAPTER I

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A world without senders, addresses, and letter carriers. A universe in which all is said dryly, in abbreviated fashion, hurriedly and on the run, without art and without grace. (Salinas as cited in Ivask, 1990, p. 213)

Purpose and Statement of the Problem

Letter writing is an emerging area of interest for professional counselors (Epston, 1994; Moules, 2003). Therapeutic letter writing practice, as a supplement to and a part of the counseling relationship with clients, has been found through prior research to be an effective intervention to support clients with problems of living and also to orient clients to the counseling experience (Bacigalupe, 2003; Epston, 1994; Kindsvatter, Nelson, & Desmond, 2009; Moules, 2002; White & Epston, 1990; Wojcik & Iverson, 1989). There also appears to be a growing awareness of the need for increased competence in the tone and structure of therapeutic letters used with clients (Epston & White, 1992; Pyle, 2009). This study examined clients’ experiences of receiving therapeutic letters. The counselors in this study wrote a letter from a humanistic expression of life and relatedness and provided this letter to each of the clients participating in this research. The clients who received the letter were interviewed by the researcher in order to ascertain an accounting of the impact of receiving the letter. Clients additionally were encouraged to talk about their perceptions regarding the impact(s) of the letter on therapeutic goals in the counseling relationship.
Contemporarily, the majority of research concerning therapeutic letter writing is primarily associated with the tradition of the post-modern, narrative counseling perspective (Alexander, Shilts, Liscio, & Rambo, 2008; Bell, Moules, & Wright, 2009; Epston, 1994, 2009; Kindsvatter et al., 2009; Kress, Hoffman, & Thomas, 2008; Moules, 2000, 2002; White & Epston, 1990). Letter writing is indicative of relational practice (Allan & Bertoia, 1992; Davidson & Birmingham, 2001; Epston, 1994; Mearns & Cooper, 2005; Pipher, 2003; Pyle, 2009; Rodgers, 2009; Rosenberg-Javors, 2006; Shepherd & Hogan, 2008; Shotter, 1993; Spinelli, 1994), and humanistic psychology highlights the centrality of relationship as a mutative force in the client’s experience of growth and change in the counseling experience. The researcher did not discover any scholarly research that points, descriptively, to clients’ phenomenological experiences of receiving humanistic letters from their counselors. It is the goal of this research to represent clients’ experiences concerning the “what” and the “how” of their experience of receiving a letter written by their counselors from a humanistic expression of relatedness while in the counseling relationship. It is also hoped that the findings from this study can enhance the already existing body of literature concerning contemporary therapeutic letter writing practice as a supplement to the counseling relationship as described by the clients who receive them.

**Research Question**

The question asked by the researcher was, “What are clients’ experiences of receiving a counseling letter from their therapists between counseling appointments?”

This study used a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of clients
relative to receiving a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter from their counselor during the counseling process. Lived experience is derived from the lifeworld concept historically formulated by Husserl and further explained by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (Bengtsson, 1988). Lived experience is associated with the German word, Erlebnis, which translated, means, “living through something.” The idea of living through something with respect to this study meant investigating the conscious aspects of the unique meaning(s) clients experienced when they received a counseling letter between counseling sessions from their therapist. The pre-reflective aspects of human existence become figural with respect to investigative importance. Merleau-Ponty (1962) defined lived experience as being connected to the manner in which people attach meaning to their circumstances. The lived experiences of individuals in relationship to the phenomenon are central to obtaining knowledge because it requires knowledge of self as a knower of the world in which they are intimately acquainted. This research focuses on how the self experiences a particular world made distinctive through the addition of a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter supplemental to the counseling relationship. A person’s lifeworld then is related to the dimensions of lived experience, which is directly created in experience previous to theoretical postulation and is ultimately made distinctive by the meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences (Bengtsson, 1988). This study is concerned with the interdependence between clients and their relationship to receiving a humanistic letter from their counselor between counseling sessions and the personal meanings clients live out as recipients of such experience.
Letter Writing in Historical Perspective

What a lot we lost when we stopped writing letters. You can’t reread a phone call. (Liz Carpenter).

The one good thing about not seeing you is that I can write you letters. (Svetlana Alliluyeva).

In order to understand the technique of writing letters from a therapeutic vantage, the history of letter writing may be helpful in order to comprehend the tradition of correspondence via the medium of letters and how letter writing as a communicative process can be linked back to the genesis of written language and a literate civilization. The epistolary history discussed in this research primarily examines letter writing practice in the context of the English language. It should be noted that ancient epistolary practice exists throughout the majority of cultures. Today, examples of primitive letter writing can be found in the Asian culture, where individuals would correspond to one another by etching words into tree bark.

Anciently, letters can be traced back to the Mesopotamian era (Nevalainen & Sanna-Kaisa, 2007). There is a collection of written correspondence dating back to 1779 B.C.E. between Bahdi-Lim, the prefect of the royal palace of Mari and Zimri-Lim, the last known king of Mari. In one letter, Bahdi-Lim wrote a brief note to notify Zimri-Lim of the circumstances where he was living and to explain a spiritual message that was provided to him by a prophetess. These early examples of letter writing highlight an unchanging feature of the utility of letters: to send a message to a recipient in which time and space separate the exchange.
Letters are also traced back to the early Middle Kingdom in Egypt around 1950 B.C.E., where letters were primarily used to correspond to another person typically separated by distance about religious teachings or in some cases to ask for favors from the reader to pray to the gods in their behalf (Baines, 2001). Other examples of letters that are documented during this era are letters that were addressed to deceased ancestors. Letter writers during this era were often highly educated men who possessed some level of social status and authority and could afford the services of a scribe to assist with the composition of a letter. Toward 1350 B.C.E., the letters in Egyptian culture became more personal in nature and were often written by women in order to maintain the niceties of social relations.

In Greek and Roman antiquity, we find a wide variety of epistolary forms. Letters were often composed on either papyrus or wood waxed tablets and were primarily used as a communicative tool for long-distance correspondence. Preserved letters from this time suggest that the primary reasons for epistolary practice were to communicate a message to a public audience, often of a political or religious nature, or to correspond to a personal friend or family member, in which the letter was more intimate or private. During this time, we also find the first documented examples of letters that were sealed to protect the confidentiality of the letter’s message (Stefan, 2010).

Primitive examples of written correspondence can also be dated as far back as Plato (Stowers, 1986). During Plato’s era, people began to shift away from the traditional oral storytelling practice toward written correspondence between two or more communicating parties (Illich & Sanders, 1988). Plato was critical of written expressions
of language due to the informal nature of the letter’s content. As people began to travel and relocate to different parts of the world, letter writing became an essential tool to maintain relationships due to geographical separation.

The literature suggests that letter writing is the oldest medium of documented literature (Stowers, 1986). The epistolary mode of expression was also documented in Greek culture by Homer around 1100 B.C.E. The Iliad contains the first appearance of the letter (Roberts, 1843). Ancient Greek society and subcultures within the Egyptian empire implemented letter writing as a medium for transmitting ideas (J. L. White, 1982). Cicero is additionally given credit for the use of informal letters to communicate to future generations of readers (Littell, 1857). Cicero was considered to be the first Roman letter writer who habitually corresponded to friends through the use of letters. Many of Cicero’s letters have been preserved through time (Littell, 1857).

Letter writing practice was a common medium of correspondence used by individuals in the Aramaic civilization between 900 B.C.E. and 200 B.C.E (Fitzmyer, 1974). Letters were often composed on skin, papyrus, or ostraca. During this era, formulaic aspects of epistolary composition that emerged were the inclusion of the names of the sender and recipient of the letter, initial and secondary greetings, a brief message, the date the letter was composed, and the mention of the scribe that assisted with writing the letter. The letters that were preserved from this era primarily contain correspondence of a religious nature between spiritual leaders and political officials.

Demetrius Phalereus, an Athenian orator and student of Theophrastus, was well known in Greek culture in 350 B.C.E. for his use of written correspondence to
disseminate ideas (Saintsbury, 1922). Demetrius influenced the creation of several
genres of letter writing during this era. During this time, letters were written to reprove,
to provide consolation, to persuade the reader, and for congratulatory purposes.

There are also several Biblical examples concerning letter writing. In the Old Testament, there are many instances of correspondence via letters before the days of Solomon (Roberts, 1843). One example is when King David wrote a letter to Joab, in which the letter was delivered by the hand of Uriah. Around 522 B.C.E., the children of captivity corresponded frequently by letters to their adversaries and the King of Persia while rebuilding their temple.

The New Testament is primarily constituted by letters that were authored by the Apostles as a means of communicating admonishments, warnings, and teachings to the spiritual members of different religious communities. Over 9,000 documented letters were written by Christians in antiquity (Stowers, 1986). Twenty-one of the 27 writings in the New Testament take the form of letters, and two of the remaining works, the book of The Acts and Revelations, contain letters within them (Stowers, 1986). Although there is not an extensive account of the existence of formal response to the letters of the apostles in the New Testament, there is evidence that after Paul’s first letter to the Christian community of Corinth, Titus, a fellow disciple of Christ, brought back word to Paul that there had been a favorable response, which then led Paul to write a second letter to the people of Corinth. The epistles of Paul, written between 50 AD and 65 AD provide early evidence of the existence and importance of letters (Chartier, Boureau, & Dauphin, 1997). It appears Paul addressed 13 letters in total, 9 of which were written to church
communities, and 4 were written to particular individuals (Timothy, Titus, and Philemon). Paul primarily used letters to aid in building communities and to saturate potential readers in values that could potentially support the persons in living a more Christian existence within these communities. Paul would also use letters to clarify and/or modify church doctrine, particularly in congregations where there were misunderstandings concerning certain aspects of Christian belief or doctrine. Letter writing was also prevalent in the Augustan era (27 BC to AD 14) of Rome and had the impact of immortalizing the author beyond his death.

Letter writing was well documented in the Greco-Roman period of antiquity, between 160 BC and 400 AD. During this era, letter writing was primarily learned in the secondary stage of education but was an activity primarily provided to male children from economic privilege and higher social class (Stowers, 1986).

Examples of letter writers during this era were Proclus Lycaeus, a Neoplatonist philosopher, and Julian the Apostate, a noted philosopher and Greek writer (Saintsbury, 1922). Julian utilized letter writing as a primary motivation for publication and dissemination of ideas. Proclus is often credited for coining the concept of a “love-letter” in which two persons write to one another to preserve and deepen feelings of intimacy in a relationship. Proclus also provided the first examples of letters that contain examples of “talking with a friend,” in which the letter appeared to be an informal conversation between close acquaintances.

Some of the characteristic features and purposes for letter writing during this time were the ability to communicate between two or more parties that were separated by
distance. Some examples of these communications were to request provisions, to promote a specific behavior in another, to initiate and maintain relationships with others, to express gratitude, to provide consolation to a person, and to educate or affect the habits of a reader (Stowers, 1986).

During the 12th century, the earliest notion of classifying types of letters emerged, ranging from humble, to middling, and finally, letters described as grandiose (Chartier et al., 1997). The type of letter typically reflected the social status of its writer. This would be the beginning of an extensive classification system typifying letters through the next several centuries of letter writing history.

Future generations of Latin writers paved the way for a style of letter writing that was more descriptive and narrative in context. This Roman practice of letter writing regained influence beginning in the 15th century to the 18th century England, which also became viewed, historically, as the “age of the great English Letter Writers” (W. L. Jones, 1990). Some well known letter writers during this era were Alexander Pope, Horace Walpole, and Vincent van Gogh (Kermode & Kermode, 1995).

In the early 16th century, Erasmus provided a guide to letter writing practice, including the idea of writing a letter with a familiar tone. During this time, English letter writing manuals proliferated throughout most literature communities. The classical tradition of letter writing by the late 17th century was primarily centered on a knowledge of Latin and often excluded those who lacked formal education (Whyman, 2009).

Due to the need for financial means to mail a letter, literacy, and the ability to either write or pay for the services of a scribe to draft a letter, letter writing was often
viewed as a practice commonly reserved for wealthy, educated men. In addition, every 17th century male child in grade school would have committed to memory the definition of letter writing, which consisted of the idea of a mutual exchange between friends who are apart from one another and that remained consistent with specific parameters regarding the appropriateness of polished letter writing.

The earliest record of epistolary exchange from the New World was found in the log book of Christopher Columbus dating back to the end of the 15th century, where he wrote about himself from the third person and described the peril he had faced in his travels. The letter was put into a wooden barrel and thrown off the ship into the sea (Decker, 1998). This would mark the “unofficial” beginning of written correspondence from the New World to family, friends, government officials, and other potential recipients in Europe, where early settlers attempted maintain relationships with loved ones overseas.

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, a Catholic priest and Dutch theologian during the late 15th and early 16th centuries, frequently wrote letters to spread information about religious doctrine (Nevalainen & Sanna-Kaisa, 2007). During this time, he also provided letter writing advice in the form of writing manuals and suggested three types of letters, including demonstrative or suggestive, judicial or political, or letters intended to persuade an audience. Desiderius also described characteristic features of letters during this time. Letters were often used to report about events, to make requests of an intended recipient, and to provide counsel.
One of the earliest letter postage systems was created in England in the beginning part of the 13th century, and it took several days for mail to be delivered short distances (How, 2003). Public postal systems were offered in the late 16th century (Whyman, 2009) and by the early 17th century, centralized procedures were in place for postal services, although the cost of sending and receiving mail was very expensive during this time. A government created postal system was created in England in the 17th century in order to assist with the increasing demand for an efficient mailing service for letters (Mallon, 2009). Mail coaches were frequently used during this time and aided in transporting England into the epistolary age. In the late 17th century, the “penny post” was instituted, and this was correlated to a significant augmentation in letters that were being mailed and delivered.

The 18th century became known as the “letter writingest” of ages from many points of view (Saintsbury, 1922, p. 22). During this time, letters took on a more formal tone and were often used to discuss the news of the day and report about significant events. During the 18th century, mail coaches and other available systems of communication became more readily available to consumers and helped to decrease the expense of the coach system (Dawson & Dawson, 1909). By the early 19th century, the public increasingly requested a reliable and affordable postal system due to the fact that letters were now viewed as an essential part of everyday living (Whyman, 2009). During 19th century British life, the recipient of a letter was often expected to pay the postage (Mallon, 2009). Penny post systems were frequently used by the public during this time as well to assist with the expense of distributing mail. Even after a federal postal system
was developed, mail continued to move irregularly from and within the United States up through the middle of the 19th century due to the unreliability of the post system (Decker, 1998).

Two categories of letter writing were prominent during this time. The first genre was the political or persuasive letter which was intended to influence the recipient regarding a particular matter. The second was considered an intimate letter, in which two or more corresponding persons wrote to one another to preserve feelings of friendship (Whyman, 2009). These letters were often preserved and enabled families to historically document their experiences through the passing of time.

During this era, particularly with the significant large population of illiterate people, scribes were used extensively to pen letters as well as to write them artistically for presentation and attractiveness and for the potential of publication. One vignette from the 15th century portrays an illiterate peasant, Margherita Datini, from Italy who married a wealthier tradesman and who over the course of time, became literate through the medium of letter writing. She relied heavily on the services of a scribe to pen her letters as she voiced them. The majority of her letters were sent to her husband as he traveled on business errands. In this article, a few of the major themes that are represented through Ms. Datini’s letter writing are that her letters to her husband gave a clear indication of the nature and tone of their relationship with one another and provided a context for emotional immediacy (Crabb, 2007). Ms. Datini primarily relied on what was called autograph writing, wherein the majority of her letter was dictated to a scribe who then composed the letter. It was suggested that the composition of the letter was what
was most important versus the penmanship. The question the author posited in this article was concerned with the fact that the majority of female-originated letters were penned by male scribes, which begs the question of how the tone of these letters was shaped by the male scribes who penned them and how the worldview of the woman dictator was potentially blurred through dictation (Crabb, 2007). Eventually, as Ms. Datini became increasing literate, she penned her own letters in an autographical style, which was viewed as being more intimate than scribal letters.

During this time, the art of merchant letter writing also became more prominent as the ability to compose and pen one’s own letters became an important variable and a basic requirement for economic longevity. Another important component of letter writing that comes from this study is the value of the salutation, which was oftentimes revealing about the social status of the writer and of the recipient. The absence of the salutation implied that the relationship was egalitarian in the context of merchant relations. In personal relationships, it was also evidence of intimacy, in that the writer and recipient could feel comfortable in “leaving aside the prefaces and prologues that are used among strangers” (Crabb, 2007, p. 1198).

Additionally, letters written in the autographical style, which were penned by hand and had an open and informal tone, were reflective of the existence of closeness in the relationship between author and recipient. Another question the author asked (Crabb, 2007) was concerned with why Florentine women, who typically did not receive a formal education, spent so much time and energy writing long and detailed letters. Some hypotheses were that they enabled a medium for intimate expression, for keeping in touch
with loved ones in a personal way, and to develop literacy and the ability to communicate oneself more entirely in relationships.

Ward (2001) described letter writing as being primarily a noblewomen’s means of conveying information and transacting business as well as networking socially with others and addressing spiritual concerns. Other definitions that existed for the utility of letters were to extend speech (Chartier et al., 1997), to deliver what is most critical about existence, and a reflective tool for reconciling oneself to someone’s absence. Women’s letter writing was viewed in both medieval society as well as in 14th and 15th century England as an acceptable, practical, and communicative activity.

The latter portion of the 18th century was marked by a significant increase in the distribution of intimate letters between parents and children and husbands and wives (Whyman, 2009). Letters written during this time existed on a continuum between formal and informal. Children were encouraged to write regularly to family members and friends, and in most cases, letter writing became a primary tool for literacy and grammar development. Letter writing also began to be viewed as a prerequisite for entering adult society.

Letter writing in practice took the form of both public and private communication, but due to the prevalence of illiteracy and convenience, particularly amongst women, the use of personal secretaries became widespread. Women would frequently write letters to their husbands that contained expressions of affection, polite rhetoric, and requests for companionship and support. Often letters were abbreviated and purposeful and in other contexts took the form of informal, lengthy correspondence of a more personal and
intimate nature. It was also noted that while women would rely more predominantly on the use of secretaries to assist in the creation of letters, men were much more likely to compose their own letters without the aid of a scribe. Ward (2001) further suggested that letter writing became a medium for women to create companionship, to link them to social networks and to minimize the effects of poverty and constrained horizons of possibilities.

Martin Luther, a theologian and spiritualist, was a prolific writer and relied heavily on the use of letter writing to correspond with church goers and with his peers. Luther conducted a great deal of his ministry by letter (P. Smith & Jacobs, 1918). Smith and Jacobs spoke to the value of Luther’s letters, saying, “The epistle . . . enjoys the double advantage of being written, like the public document, on the spot, and of revealing, like the memoir, the real inward attitude of an actor in the drama” (p. 5). Luther’s letters were a strong example of a revelatory attitude taken by the author concerning his personality, characteristics, needs, and concerns and making these known to the recipient(s). In a letter written in 1525 to a Mr. Briessman, Luther stated, “There I am writing to you only briefly, since I am loaded down with so much that has to be written . . . I am overwhelmed with writing letters” (Luther, 1975, pp. 122, 242).

Presently, over 3,000 of Luther’s letters still exist and are available for public viewing. The majority of Luther’s letters were penned by his hand as opposed to being dictated to a scribe. When the recipients of Luther’s writings were viewed as educated, Luther would write in Latin and on the converse, he would write in German when writing to less educated audiences (Tappert, 1955).
In Louise Wannell’s (2007) study about letter writing in doctor and patient relationships from the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, she explained that letter writing between family members and physicians treating the loved family member in hospital settings was a very common practice. Wannell suggested that letter writing was a very important means for families to maintain correspondence with doctors and for doctors to retain responsibility for the client. One study revealed that in England, the correspondence of letters written between physicians and the family members of clients being seen by the doctor increased from 76 million items in 1839 to 3,500,000 in 1914. These letters enabled patients to maintain bonds with family members and to be transparent about concerns about their treatment, which in turn made it possible for the family to advocate for the health needs of the ill family member. Additionally, letters written by family members to the physician enabled them to develop relationships and highlight feelings of concern and caring as well as to ask questions about the health of the ill family member. In the context of this study, this is significant in that it points to the capacity for an effective letter to evoke a response in its recipient and to create an impact upon the relationship between sender and receiver.

Letters were also written by family members as a means of emotional performance, comparable to 19\textsuperscript{th} century letters written by female writers in a tone of “begging,” in an attempt to solicit heightened aid from physicians (Saintsbury, 1922). These letters also were revelatory concerning the family members’ level of distress in relation to being separated from their relatives and to cope with the difficulties associated with an uncertain context. This article also pointed to the limitations of letter writing, as
evidenced by the tone used by the authors of letters who would often request to see the face of the physician and relate to them more personally as well as the difficulties in being transparent about intimate thoughts and concerns on paper.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, advertisements for letter writing equipment such as quill pens, ink, writing paper, and desks often used images of women sitting at a desk in a thoughtful pose, with a pen in hand and paper scattered about. Envelopes were introduced during this time and replaced the sealing wax method for enclosing a document for mailing purposes (Mallon, 2009).

Educational settings commonly introduced letter writing practices to children and provided suggestions for appropriate letter writing (Schultz, 2000). Some of these suggestions for the inclusion of content in letters were: anecdotes of playground activities, difficulties with teachers and peers, descriptions of intimate friends, books that the child is reading, any extraordinary indulgence, and so forth. Ultimately, letter writing took on the form and shape of emergent social practice and was a foundational component of literate communities.

In their attempt to dismiss criticism concerning the letter as being an inferior mode of literary expression, Dawson and Dawson (1909) explained that an effective letter demands from its author certain characteristics and qualities that are complex and evolved, stating, “The man who is not prepared to unlock his heart to us can never write a good letter” (pp. 11-12). This reflects a description of the personhood of the writer of letters—letters that have the capacity to make an experiential impact on its reader(s). Dawson and Dawson suggested writer characteristics such as a willingness to be
vulnerable and communicate honestly in the letter as an imperative aspect of the personal
letter writing process, which is a deviation from previous counsel regarding letter
construction which had been primarily concerned with techniques and structure of
effective letter writing. They suggested that of greater importance in the composition of
a letter are the attributes of the person penning the communication.

In the 19th century, predominant letter writers continued to be women, such as
Jane Austen and George Eliot. Dawson and Dawson (1909) suggested that this is in part
due to the women’s natural inclination toward eloquence in literary expression of
heartfelt material. In addition to women writers, prominent figures continued to use
letters as a means of corresponding about a variety of topics. Thomas Gray, a schoolmate
to Horace Walpole and well known English poet, corresponded frequently via letters
concerning his travels. Walpole described Gray’s letters as being “very good” because
they were like “very good talk, recorded” (Saintsbury, 1922, p. 39). During this time,
letters were typically classified as being instructional, propaganda, or argumentative in
nature.

The goal of letter writing that emerged in the late 19th century was to:

Cement, maintain and extend the bonds of social life and solidarity. Whatever
secrets there were . . . formed the basis of the specific identity of a whole group,
constructed by the process of exchange between those who belonged to it
[through letters]. (Chartier et al., 1997, p. 15)

Toward the latter end of the 19th century, banking and commercial letters accounted for
over 50% of the letters distributed by public mail services where under 20% were
reflective of a personal and/or intimate nature. Letters exchanged between family members during this time were primary utilized to gather information, to make requests for provisions, and to recover outstanding debts from nonpaying creditors.

Letter writing manuals published in the 19th century suggested that letters should create the appearance of oral communication. Chartier et al. (1997) summarized 19th century guidelines concerning letter writing,

A letter is a conversation between people who are absent from one another . . . To succeed at it, imagine that you are in the presence of whomever you are addressing, that they can hear the sound of your voice and that their eyes are fixed on yours. (p. 132)

It was believed that when two persons wrote letters to one another, the act was viewed as relation and not one of correspondence. Publications of letter writing manuals began to decline by the end of the 19th century, giving way to the erosion of formulaic aspects of letter writing (Chartier et al., 1997). People began to write more informally, guided by impulse as opposed to conventions. Letters became more reflective of the self-expression of the writer’s personality, and letter writing norms began to shift toward greater freedom with respect to composition (Whyman, 2009). Letter writing continued to flourish during the 19th century across the North American continent due to migrating families causing individuals to become reliant upon letters to maintain feelings of connection. Letters written during this time that were preserved reflect themes of complex strategies regarding relatedness and the attempt to nurture family bonds.
The letter writing area began to decline around the time of World War II with the technological invention of telephones (M. Jones, 2009; Kermode & Kermode, 1995). With the advent of telephones and later on, other technological advancements such as voicemail, cellular phones, fax machines, and electronic emailing, communication became more immediate, thus reducing the delay time between author and recipient. The expediency of these modes of being in relationship appeared to entice persons away from handwritten letters and more toward abbreviated, quicker modes of correspondence.

Gadamer (1989) posited that the effectiveness of communication has been hampered through the advance of technology and its imposition on how people are in relationship with one another. T. T. Williams (1991) suggested that the delay between the actual sending of a letter and the recipient’s eventual receiving of the communication infuses the communicative process with a unique and increasingly intimate nature of togetherness. In an online article in Newsweek, M. Jones (2009) suggested that contemporarily, technological advancements related to correspondence, such as the telephone, have highlighted the value of a revelatory personal letter due to its infrequent usage. Ultimately, Jones suggested that letter writing has inherited greater significance and meaning in its utility due to the convenience of communicating with another telephonically. Mailed letters have been replaced with a multitude of technological mediums for correspondence, including emails, web chats, and social networking.

A further word about the technological letter, or electronic mail: the possibilities exist that there is a peculiar attractiveness or perceived easiness to the spontaneity of being able to write and receive a letter, almost instantaneously but that may not create
space for reflection that an intimate letter might demand in both its genesis and in its receipt. Mallon (2009) posed the question, “Is email even mail?” (p. 6). There is an obvious difference between electronic forms of correspondence and slower methods of communication such as the mailed letter. How are these different methods experienced by those parties that constitute their practice in daily life? Understanding the perceived differences between slower forms of correspondence versus those that are reflective of technological advancements toward efficiency (e.g., time) could be an important area for future exploration. Decker (1998) suggested that the journey a writer takes in penning a letter, inclusive of careful attention to composition, form, and tone and having a sense of the letter’s place in the receiver’s experience differentiates it substantially from contemporary, technological mediums for transmitting ideas to another.

Contemporarily, the use of letters exchanged through the mail to maintain relationships has become a rare mode of preserving proximity and relatedness. Current research about the use of written correspondence suggests that some of the more common purposes are to acknowledge absence, to maintain friendship, to provide advice or support, and to complain (Mallon, 2009). Questions encompass this phenomenon presently. Letters have a unique capacity to preserve an historical sense of lived experience and as the use of letter writing diminishes in relationships, is there a possibility that connection to one’s historical past is somehow jeopardized? How does the recipient of a posted letter respond? Is the letter viewed as a gift, something beyond the periphery and fringes of surprise?
Thinking about the research question for this study, the primary interest is in investigating the lived experience of recipients of therapeutic letters in a counseling relationship relative to receipt of the letter. The historical longevity of letter writing practice points toward its efficacy in maintaining relationship and creating a relational consciousness of reciprocal influence. The primary purpose of this investigation is to increase understanding about the potential for a humanistically-oriented letter to serve a meaningful function in the lives of clients who receive it from their therapist and to listen attentively to the stories of people who are experiencing this unique continuation of therapeutic dialogue outside the boundaries of the counseling office.

The next section explores the literature regarding the researcher’s hypothesis that letters have a phenomenological impact in the experiential worlds of recipients. In order to address the research question for this study, the researcher attempted to highlight some of the consistent features of impact regarded by recipients of letters, both historically and contemporarily.

**Letter Writing and Experiential Impact**

When you’re conscious and writing from a place of insight and simplicity and real caring about the truth, you have the ability to throw the lights on for your reader. He or she will recognize his or her life and truth in what you say, in the pictures you have painted, and this decreases the terrible sense of isolation that we have all had too much of. (Lamott, 1994, pp. 225-226)

The research question that frames this study is: “What is the impact (experience) on (of) clients receiving a letter in counseling that is written from a humanistic expression of life?” This research question assumes that letter writing does have some impact upon readers. In order to investigate this phenomenon, it may be helpful to discuss the
relationship between writing letters and the influence of the letters upon the recipient(s).

Letter writing has been a historically well documented means of communication between corresponding parties in relationship (Baker, 1909; Barton & Hall, 2000; Bland & Cross, 2004; Brant, 2006; Daybell, 2001; Decker, 1998; Gaul & Harris, 2009; United Postal Service, 1982). Historically and contemporarily, letters have provided a relational bridge between writer and reader(s). Letter writing takes many different forms depending on the purposes for the writing and the personality of the writer, including the more traditionally employed handwritten notes or memos exchanged, often by mailing services between two or more persons, telecommunications (e-mail, fax messages, phone text, instant messaging, blogging, telephonic messages), and typed documents that are mailed in the form of letters (Decker, 1998; Shepherd, 2002). For the purpose of this study, letter writing is viewed as handwritten and/or typed documents written by the therapist that are mailed directly to the client via the postal system.

Conceptualized as artifacts, written letters can often contain a healing touch as they are transmitted from the writer’s hand to the recipient’s hand enhancing the intimacy and connection with loved ones, both alive and dead (Carpenter, 1978). Oppositely, letters can also be destructive and upsetting. An example of this type of letter would be a “Dear John” letter used to communicate a desire to end an ongoing relationship. Individuals that utilize epistolary practice in order to reflect about complicated ideas or their relationship to another person can oftentimes be aided in slowing the process of relatedness. Feelings and thoughts are often crystallized during the writing process with respect to the self of the writer and his or her relationship to a particular idea or to another
person. The research (Ivask, 1990) often viewed letter writing or epistolary practice as an art or an experiential way of giving special attention to relationship and the intricacies of connectedness.

Many questions surround the debate between more traditionally used mediums of communication via letter writing versus more advanced modes of technological communication; however, for the purposes of this study, it is confined to a more traditional medium of lettering between two consenting persons. One of these possible questions could be, “What are the differences and similarities between letters that are constructed by hand and sent via mail services versus those composed, electronically, and sent through cyberspace?”

The United States Postal Service created an advertisement in 1996 imploring customers to write more hand-written letters and to use their services more frequently:

> In this electronic age, a letter is personal and permanent. It says you took the time and trouble to communicate. The impact of a letter is unique, whether you’re complaining about a disappointing purchase or declaring your love . . . The point is, write. A letter or card is truly a unique gift—a piece of yourself. (as cited in Mallon, 2009, p. 8)

The most substantial time period in which correspondence through letters was at its peak was during the World War II and up through the Vietnam era, particularly within the United States and foreign postal service agencies (Decker, 1998; Hartley, 1999; United Postal Service, 1982). Hartley’s (1999) study discovered that there were more letters written and received during World War II than at any other time in the history of
postal correspondence. One assumption that can be made from this was an overwhelming desire to remain connected with loved ones while family members were separated by war. Another generalization that could be made from this seeming exponential influx of letter writing is that writing and receiving letters sustained relationships, buffered against feelings of loneliness, and fostered feelings of intimacy and love. There are likely many possible explanations for the significant decline in the use of the handwritten note as a medium for connection since the mid 1950s. One of these might be the proliferation of e-mail in peoples’ lives that either exterminates or renews (there could be many possible arguments) the practice and art of letter writing. Due to the use of letters, obstacles such as physical distance and geography dissolved to some extent and now with the advent of technology and many diverse mediums for instantaneous communication, it appears that the relational impediment of time has also, to some extent, dissolved as well.

Milne (2010) suggested that throughout time, written communication in the form of letters, holiday notes, birthday cards, or postcards mailed between two corresponding parties essentially has been used to help people that are far apart, either spatially or in time, feel more connected physically, psychologically, and emotionally or perhaps to remind one another of absence.

There likely exists a future study in the field of social science comparing the impact of hand written letters to those effects of technologically sent communications; however, there does seem to be a significant trend that speaks to the “unique gift” (as
cited in Mallon, 2009, p. 8) and exceptional value of the handwritten letter in contemporary society.

Another interesting aspect of letter writing is the abundance of resources that are available, both in the past and currently, about the “how” of writing letters, across all disciplines and fields, such as business, personal, persuasive, religious, and political (Baker, 1909; Decker, 1998; Klauser, 1995; Ruxton, 1918; Shepherd, 2002; Shepherd & Hogan, 2008; Venolia, 1982). The above is only a thin sampling of the existing literature that speaks to the development of letter writing skills and of their influence in a variety of cultures and interpersonal contexts; however, they point to the continued significance of letter writing and its special nature in communicative environments. As a researcher, this information is significant because it deepens the conversation about the efficacy of letters in social practice.

It is difficult to assess accurately the measure and depth of influence letters have upon receivers (as well as the writer of the letters). It would be fair to suggest that letter writing, due to its longstanding existence, has some enduring value in its utility. Some of the meanings for the use of letters as an interpersonal vehicle of communication were: moral teaching, disseminate advice, letters of appeal, business engagement, political discussion, travel narratives, advertisement, entertainment, begging, and for personal communication to develop, maintain, and nurture relationships (W. L. Jones, 1990).

Jourard (1971) suggested that the authentic writer discloses his or her experience in a way that has no other purpose but to be faithful to one’s own experience with the intent to enrich the other’s experience (the reader). He further explained that letting
another see how one has or is experiencing the events that impact his or her life is a risky practice because it invites the reader to stretch or flex in order to encounter him or her in their uniquely personal context.

Jourard (1971) provided one definition of the interpersonal writing process as being synonymous with love, in that the writer gives of what is uniquely himself or herself, undisguised, in written word. An important characteristic of the effective writer is the capacity to have an enlarged and sensitive soul. Jourard suggested that this kind of writer needs to be able to be receptive and intentionally attuned to the effects of existence upon himself or herself. Moules (2000) supported Jourard’s stance, contending that writing authentically demands the writer to openly expose something of himself or herself, to become transparent and to risk being viewed and experienced in the relationship.

The documented letters between Winston Churchill and his wife, Clementine, provide a rich snapshot into the potency of letter writing and its effects upon the relationship of the writer and the reader (Soames, 2001). One of the more significant characteristics that is evident in the tone of these letters is the spontaneity and seeming unforced nature. The letters provided a safe medium for them to discuss their views about politics, social life, personal maladies such as Winston’s disclosure of his “depression” (p. xiv), family difficulties, expressions of loneliness and appeals to be reunited, and ultimately their communications about their partnership and the evidence of love that existed between them. While, often, the letters do not survive, the correspondence between the Churchills is an important example of the value of this
nature of correspondence—in the sentiments, genuine concern, thoughtfulness, and honesty that was evidenced throughout the majority of the letters. It was apparent that the letters had an effect upon the recipients. Generally speaking, the consequence was greater closeness, intimacy, and an increased and clarified understanding of the other’s context and experience.

Some examples provided by the rich annuals of relationships made distinctive through letters include Emperor Julian’s letter to the philosopher and friend Iamblichus, where Julian wrote about his “joy at the experience of receiving a friend’s letter” (Chartier et al., 1997, p. 65). Julian’s letters are indicative of the potential effect of a letter upon its recipient when written from a friendly disposition. Basil, the bishop of Caesarea, wrote in response to a letter received from Jovinus, a count of the empire, saying, “I saw your soul in your letter” (Chartier et al., 1997, p. 67). This example implies that in absence, letters give temporal access to the recipient to “see” its author in some ephemeral capacity. The account of the writing relationship between two brothers, the Tuckers of Weymouth, Dorsetshire, in the late 18th century reveals that receiving a letter can bring “exquisite relief” (Whyman, 2009).

In addition, receiving a letter from an acquaintance or friend has been noted through preserved examples of written correspondence to produce feelings of appreciation. Some examples of this are noted in Pedro Correa do Lago’s collection of written correspondences (2004). Alfred Dreyfus, a French artillery officer in the late 19th century often wrote to family and friends while away during war times. In one letter, he wrote to a friend by the name of Paul who had apparently corresponded with him at an
earlier time. “My dear Paul, your letter gave me great pleasure, and if you knew the joy that you bring me, you would force yourself to give it to me more often” (p. 145).

Another example was the correspondence between Paul Delvaux, a Belgian surrealist painter during the early 20th century and a friend from his youth that he had lost touch with for over 40 years.

My dear Jules, Thank you for your nice letter which has given me the greatest pleasure. Thank you also for everything you say. It’s a real shame that Buenos Aires is such a long way away! But our old friendship will remain intact in spite of the distance. (p. 243)

In a separately related example, Federico Fellini, an Italian film director and screenwriter during the early 20th century, frequently wrote letters to a German colleague and friend, Baldwin. Responding to a letter from Baldwin, Fellini wrote, “Dear Baldwin, I have received your ‘simpatica’ letter in which you present to me in a very enthusiastic way. All right, I will consider with particular attention your recommendation” (p. 260).

Letters appear to have a multitude of functions in addition to the desire to correspond with another person that is separated by the writer through geographical distance. The letters also appear to have an evocative effect on the intended recipient. In some cases, appreciation is noted and in other cases, recipients are compelled to respond in a particular way. This tendency for a letter to evoke a response in the life of its recipient is a central aspect of the premise for this current investigation with respect to client responses to a counseling letter from their therapist.
Rosenberg-Javors (2006) explained that letters help us to see how our relationship is changing with time and gives the writer a forum to render the “what” and “how” of his or her deeper feelings and ideas. Writing letters, she suggested, enables the writer to communicate caring and concern in a way that is perhaps more permanent and indelible and serves as a vehicle for meaningful communication. Rosenberg-Javors contended letter writing that is impactful and rich begs the writer to develop an enlarged capacity for focus and personal presence and demands that they make a more resolved commitment to the person being written to and to one’s feelings about the significance of the relationship in his or her life.

Maybin (2001) qualitatively documented the experiences of death row inmates that were the recipients of pen-pal letters. Some of the themes of the inmates’ experiences as a consequence of receiving letters from persons they did not know were a buffer against isolation and a mirror that enabled them to see themselves with increased clarity. Others suggested that the writing correspondence helped them to slow down the process of the relationship, generating more thoughtfulness and reflective practice in the exchange of letters. Others commented on the importance of the time that would pass between the writing, sending, and receiving of handwritten letters. Ultimately, the inmates that participated in the study explained that receiving letters supported them in developing previously unknown aspects of themselves and enhanced their overall experience (Maybin, 2001). This study points to evidence that receiving letters and writing in response to letters can be an invitation to the recipient of the letter to reassess their life and consider a reconstruction of self and of personal identity.
Roper (2001) explained the value of the personal letter as being a container and a tool for personal expression of oneself. Letter writing can support individuals in being able to clarify their feelings and thoughts about a particular relationship and with a particular experience. Watson (2000) provided an account of William Faulkner and his letters to his mother and to other significant persons in his life. Watson suggested that the letters were critical to Faulkner’s published works because they enabled him to preserve his experiences and to crystallize his thinking about these events that were entirely and personally his own. The consequence of these letters were the production of various artistic and published written works such as *Sanctuary* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

George Sand, a French feminist, wrote to one of her protégés, an aspiring poet:

As regards to the letter you write to me, my dear poet, and which I always review with true pleasure, do not ask me if they are well written. They are. Your heart is in them, and that is all the reader seeks. (as cited in Bland & Cross, 2004, p. 3)

Moules (2000) articulated the importance of reclaiming connection in our lives, suggestive of acknowledging connection, meaning, and the existence of community. She explained that one way of doing this is to validate how people come to experience their world and by acknowledging the sacred quality of relationship that exists in these highly personal worlds. An exploration of tone and of the writer’s inner self might be an appropriate stance to approach the question of heart-writing, where the writer expresses, as descriptively and honestly as possible, the feelings, thoughts, and ideas that comprise his or her experience of another as well as the reciprocal nature of the relationship. How does a writer access and write from the heart, which could also be viewed as the writer’s
more authentic center and attunement with self? If the reader is seeking the writer’s heartful expression, how does the writer render his or her authenticity in the intent and substance of the letter so that his or her heart can be received unambiguously by the reader?

Kermode and Kermode (1995) proposed that the most admirable of letters that intend some level of interpersonal intimacy contain a consistent thematic element that make it recognizable to its reader, in that the tone and language used by the writer will bear some resemblance of the interpersonal landscape shared by the writer and recipient. Being able to capture and maintain one’s personal tone within the context of writing, as though one were speaking in the relationship, seems to be imperative to the process of epistolary art and to the potential for the writing to evoke an admirable impact upon its intended audience. Kermode and Kermode further suggested that the relational tone of the letter must also resemble the existing tone of the relationship that lives outside the margins of the actual letter itself, or the potency of the letter can become diminished.

British novelist and essayist, V. S. Naipaul, frequently wrote letters to family members back in Trinidad, while living in France. In one particular letter after what Naipaul later described as experiencing a nervous breakdown, he wrote home to family, saying, “Keep me alive with letters” (as cited in Mallon, 2009). Receiving letters supported Naipaul in managing the effects of loneliness and separation from family and familiarity as well as from the residue of distresses in his life while living in France.

Mallon (2009) provided another vignette of letter writing that occurred between Mariana Vaz Alcoforado, a Portuguese nun, who lived in the Convent of the Poor Ladies
in Beja, Portugal, and a French officer, Noel Bouton de Chamilly. In a response to one of Mariana’s letters, in which she scolded Chamilly for his dissatisfactory and abbreviated letters, Chamilly wrote back:

Your last letter reduced my heart to a peculiar state: its pounding was so extreme it made . . . efforts to leave my body and go find you; I was so overcome by all these violent emotions that I remained abandoned by my senses for more than three hours; I stopped myself from returning to a life I must lose since I cannot keep it for you. (as cited in Mallon, 2009, p. 154)

Due to the existence of mature feelings of closeness between Mariana and Chamilly, it appeared that Mariana’s appeal to Chamilly in her letter had a psychological impact on him, as the reader, as evidenced by the emotionally-laden response he sent to Mariana. Moules (2000) explained that letters help us to reconsider our presence and absence with one another, influencing both states to become more fluid as opposed to remaining static and unchangeable. Perhaps an artful and helpful letter nudges both the reader and writer into an intrapersonal space of new awareness of self and self-in-relationship to writer.

Moules (2000) suggested the importance of being able to stay in tune with the tone of oneself and simultaneously be in tune with the tone of the relationship when corresponding through letters. Questions the writer might ask could be, “Does the tone of the relationship resemble the tone of the letter?” and “Is this letter sustainable by the existing relationship between the writer and the recipient?”
Letters also contain experiences and expressions that can be negatively impactful and as a consequence can have an adverse effect upon the recipient. Underneath the expression of any communication exists the genesis of personhood, or the speaker and his or her frame of reference and perspective on or about a particular situation or relationship. Ultimately, the writer tells from his or her stance and drafts this unique perspective with some intention or hoped for impact upon the recipient of the communication.

For the purpose of this study, there is interest in the qualities of the person of the writer, such that the writer is speaking to clients through the medium of letters in a way that is reflective of humanistic values and beliefs regarding relationship. This study is concerned with the experiences of clients who receive a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter from their counselor between counseling sessions with the hope of discovering shared aspects of experience that can speak to qualities that contribute to a written therapeutic letter being impactful in a positive and enriching sense, the intentionality of the letter writing, the characteristics of the letter that contribute to its potency as an impactful letter in the life of its reader, and the interpersonal elements that exist in the relationship between writer and reader that impinge upon the letter’s residual subjective impact in the recipient’s experiencing of the letter.

The question this research study is primarily interested with then is the impact of such a writing process upon the recipient. The research is also concerned with the characteristics that delineate a letter as being impactful in a helpful sense, and how a
portion of the impact upon and/or within the recipient carries with it growthful properties or supports the reader in moving toward improved health and psychological well-being.

The following section transitions from discussing the experiential and interpersonal impact of letters, generally, to a more pointed review of the use of letters in a therapeutic setting between counselor and client. The reader will be supported in gaining an understanding from the origins of written documents in the mental health setting and its various forms and purposes as well as the current literature regarding the use of therapeutic letters in the counseling relationship.

**Letter Writing in a Therapeutic Context**

Every letter remains an attempt to name . . . some complex aspect of the human experience and keep it available through time. We peer into the new letter . . . that we might find there a few words to illuminate more widely our passage through the dark woods . . . And the art of letters remains . . . our wish to feel joined to some fabric that both gives meaning to and is made meaningful by the part of it we are. (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 196)

I have been intrigued by the possibilities of helping people change the way they see themselves and their relationships to important people in their lives through letter writing. (Penn, 1991, pp. 43-45)

In order to address the question of experiential impact that clients perceive in their experience of receiving a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter from their counselors during the clinical experience, it is important to provide both a historical summary and a contemporary description of the modality of clinical letter writing and its multiple purposes in the counseling relationship.
Origins of Therapeutic Letter Writing

The first published documentations of therapists using written letters in counseling relationships were by Burton (1965) and Ellis (1965). Due to an extended bout with laryngitis, Albert Ellis was compelled to write back and forth to clients during counseling sessions as well as outside of the confines of the counseling room with clients that lived distances away that he was unable to speak with on the telephone. Burton (1965) suggested that the use of therapeutic letters in counseling relationships contributed to therapeutic change in client experiences. There is also evidence that letter writing was a common practice that Jungian clinicians used with their clients (Allan & Bertoia, 1992). Wagner, Weeks, and L’Abate (1980) used letter writing in therapeutic settings with couples, initially as homework assignments for the couples to write to one another. He subsequently modified this intervention to include letter writing in the counseling relationship, suggesting that written expressions had the potential to be more therapeutically beneficial to clients than verbally communicated interventions. Later, the Milan family therapy team published their work on therapeutic letter writing and paradoxical intention with families which they found to be an effective intervention for supporting clients in moving toward therapeutic growth and change (Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1978).

Irvin Yalom (Yalom & Elkin, 1974) undertook an “accidental” project with a client, Ginny, in the early 1970s, when he initially asked Ginny to write about her experiences of the therapeutic hour after each session. Gradually this homework assignment evolved into a spontaneous process where Yalom and Ginny wrote letters
about their experiences of the therapy hour and would exchange these letters in the form of correspondence between counseling sessions. One of the consequences of this process was the creation of a published book that contains their relationship via the letters they wrote to one another in a reciprocal way, entitled, *Every Day Gets a Little Closer: A Twice-Told Therapy*, where Ginny Elkin and Irvin Yalom are listed as co-authors of the text. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) later described this process as written summaries, an intervention he frequently employed in his work with therapeutic groups. Yalom (Yalom & Elkin, 1974; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) explained that what makes the letters therapeutic is the therapist’s willingness to participate with the client from a vantage of equal candidness, willing to match the honesty, sharing, and tone of the client’s disclosures through writing, thus encouraging the client to relate more genuinely with the counselor. Yalom (Yalom & Elkin, 1974; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), as did Ms. Elkin, contended that written communications often enhanced the client’s therapy experience.

**Growth of Clinical Letter Writing**

examples of how therapeutic letters have been used as a counseling modality are to engage nonattending members of the family and to invite them to participate in counseling (Wilcoxen & Fenell, 1983); to support clients in finding meaningful solutions to presenting concerns (Wojcik & Iverson, 1989); to aid families experiencing a crisis such as a family illness (Levac et al., 1998); to manage the treatment process in a more fluid manner (Lown & Britton, 1991); to support clients in becoming more engaged in the therapeutic experience (Shilts & Ray, 1991); to modify rigid family rules and disrupt family homeostasis, such as through paradoxical intention (Elkaim, 1985; Palazzoli et al., 1978); to provide visual images, such as cartoons, to evoke thought about client concerns (Kennedy, 1995; Zimmerman & Shepherd, 1993); to function as a relationally-sensitive clinical record of the counseling relationship (Wood & Uhl, 1988; Andrews, Clark, & Baird, 1997); to highlight and celebrate therapeutic successes (White & Epston, 1990); and to provide information prior to the initial client meeting (Coles, 1995).

In her research concerning the use of clinical letters in nursing practice with families experiencing illness, Moules (2000) suggested that up until the date of her study, there had been no published qualitative research about the effectiveness or influence of therapeutic letters. One of the recommendations she suggested pertained to future descriptive research concerning other styles of therapeutic letter writing that exist in practice, specifically outside the context of family therapy and nursing practice, such as mental health professions. While some limited body of research exists concerning therapeutic letter writing in counseling practice, it is primarily of a quantitative nature. The qualitative examples of therapeutic letter writing exist in the field of nursing practice.
and continue to be examined, systemically, in the field of family counseling. This study is interested in the practice of relationally-attuned letter writing practice (Kelly, 1997) and the impact of letter writing in the field of counseling in the lives of those who are recipients of this intervention.

**Therapeutic Letter Writing: Characteristics**

Some additional examples of letter writing to clients are to follow-up with the client after difficult endings to therapy and/or to address a particularly intense experience of catharsis during a challenging session (Omer, 1991) and to disseminate information to the client to normalize experiences they might be going through during the counseling relationship (Harper-Jacques & Masters, 1994). The above examples of letter writing point to the diversity and reported usefulness of letters and the myriad of concerns that can be addressed in a therapeutically sensitive manner.

The Family Nursing Unit, located at the University of Calgary, has used therapeutic letters with families as a nursing intervention for more than 22 years (Levac et al., 1998). Therapeutic letters were initially introduced into practice as a means of supporting families where a member was experiencing a significant illness in order to encourage collaboration and the creation of a mutually disclosing counseling relationship with the family (Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996). One of the central characteristics of this modality of therapeutic letter writing is to highlight client strengths and provide commendations, or therapist offerings of observations of client(s) behavior or accomplishments that have transpired over time, wherein the client has provided sufficient evidence of this change, and the counselor is able to provide a sincere and
sensitive expression of this experience (Wright & Leahey, 2000). Other characteristics commonly used when contextualizing letters written to families are to explain to the client and/or family what they have taught to the therapist, underline ideas that are generated during the counseling session that are significant to the client’s story of problem resolution, and provide alternatives and new ideas or questions that encourage the client to think about their experience from a different perspective. Additional examples of clinical letters used in nursing practice talk about the importance of augmenting indications of change, to contest beliefs clients hold that limit their potential to view their strengths and resourcefulness and to reinforce beliefs that facilitate movement toward therapeutic change, to acknowledge mistakes made by the counselor, and to encourage counselors to reflect on their relationships with clients (Wright et al., 1996).

Michael White and David Epston (1989, 1990) have contributed a great deal to the collective body of research concerned with the use of therapeutic letters in counseling relationships. Epston (1994) explained that he began to write letters to clients when he worked at a community mental health agency in the late 1970s with families that presented with adolescent children with problematic behaviors. He quickly saw the helpfulness of the use of letters as a part of his therapeutic practice and began writing about his work in the late 1980s, in part with Michael White, who was also using therapeutic letters in counseling practice, particularly with families and couples. Epston explained that writing letters to clients became an extension of the therapeutic conversations he shared with clients. He viewed the letters as being intricately
intertwined with the therapy process, as opposed to seeing the writing of letters as being a separate practice. Epston further suggested that therapeutic letters gave him a therapeutic medium to be transparent with clients in a way that enabled his wonderings about the client’s story and problems to be presented for clients to see. He also said that writing letters to clients enabled him to become more present and deeply attentive to the conversations he shared with clients. Through the letters, he was able to enter, more empathically, into client narratives and then, afterward, become further absorbed in the retelling of client stories and of his experiences of the clients in the form of intimate letters. He explained that writing a therapeutic letter was like an invitation to faithfully document and capture onto paper specific thoughts and feelings and to transpose these for the client, which he found made the therapeutic experience more memorable for both the counselor and client(s).

Epston and White (1989) described therapeutic letters as being like narrative: Letters constitute a medium rather than a particular genre and as such can be employed for any number of purposes . . . . In a storied therapy, the letters are used primarily for the purpose of rendering lived experience into a narrative or “story,” one that makes sense according to the criteria of coherence and lifelikeness. By professional letters, I am referring to those communications between professionals about persons and their problems. Typically, the persons who are subjects of these letters are excluded from any access to this record, even though their futures may be shaped by it. In a storied therapy, the letters are a version of that co-
constructed reality called therapy and become the shared property of all the parties to it. (pp. 125-126)

Epston and White (1989) suggested specific conditions that can support the client in participating more fully in the continuous creation and process of transforming meaning (Gergen, 1996) in their lives through the therapeutic endeavor, made distinctive through collaborative letter-writing practice between counselor and client. Writing letters to clients is reflective of an interpersonal process that speaks to an important quality of relationship, where the therapist values mutuality, equalness, and transparency. This can enable the client access to the same ambiguous terrain he or she experiences, and both share entry to this storied version of therapy through verbal and written expressions of meaning of dialogue and inquiry. An important part of this storied therapy in the context of letter writing is the counselor’s ability to point the client toward gaps in his or her story and to invite the client to consider these to more fully perform a preferred and less problem-saturated story. Such a practice may transform a story of deficit into a narrative of resourcefulness and the genesis of meaningful, self-created solutions (Gergen, 1990).

Rombach (2003) expanded upon the theme of the use of letters to honor the relational perspective of mutuality, collaboration, and viewing the therapist-client voyage as a shared journey, where both take on the active role of fellow travelers, suggesting that the primary responsibility of the counselor in writing letters to the client is to support them in recognizing that their ultimate task is to become the primary editor of their letter(s). Rombach also talked about the value of letters as being an additional layer of therapeutic support that aids the clients in being able to discover and/or create a more
accurate view of self through the therapist’s expression of his or her perception of client wisdom that is already within the client’s telling of his or her story but that has been disowned by the client over time.

A primary goal of the therapeutic letter, according to Rombach (2003), is to nudge clients toward a more experienced reading of their own inner wisdom within the margins of the therapeutic conversation, both in verbal and written correspondence. Rombach also suggested that therapist letters that take a reflective tone and approach clients from a stance of genuine curiosity and wonder can support them in exploring ambiguous landscapes within their narrative and aid them in moving toward meaningful problem resolution and the creation of a more desired reality. Rombach further articulated that letter writing supports the counselor in improving his or her conceptualization of the client’s concerns and enables him or her to stay with, or horizontal with the client in the therapeutic experience.

**Counseling Documents and Perceived Therapeutic Impact**

Freedman and Combs (1996) explained that letters from counselors to clients have been used for some time and with many different therapeutic aims. They also provided quantitative research about the effectiveness of therapeutic letters in counseling practice, pointing to the value of a therapeutic letter as perceived by the clients receiving them as being worth the equivalent of 3 to 10 face-to-face counseling sessions. Further research suggests that clients experience the therapeutic value of letters written by their counselors to them during the course of therapy as being worth the equivalent of between two and one half counseling sessions (White, 1995) and as much as four to five
counseling sessions (Nylund & Thomas, 1994). In a recent pilot study (Rodgers, 2009), 40 surveys were completed by clients who received letters from their therapist, and the average worth of one letter was equivalent to three and one third face-to-face interviews. While this data is numerical and somewhat ambiguous in its meaning, it is clear that letters written by counselors to clients during the counseling process are viewed by clients as having some therapeutic significance. Understanding this perceived value from a qualitative perspective could enhance the discussion about the utility of letter writing practice in the therapeutic relationship.

Contemporary research concerning the perceived value of the use of therapeutic letters with clients while in the counseling relationship (Alexander et al., 2008; Bacigalupe, 2003; Blanton, 2006; France et al., 1995; Kindsvatter et al., 2009; Moules, 2003; Pyle, 2006; Riordan, 1996; White, 1995) suggested that clients indicate a therapeutic letter from their counselor carries, experientially, equivalent and sometimes greater therapeutic meaning than individual, face-to-face appointments with their counselor. This research highlights the growing influence of therapeutic letters in counseling practice, contemporarily, and also points to the need for continued exploration about the shared and individual meanings clients give to their experiences of receiving therapeutic letters during their counseling experiences.

Parry and Doan (1994) and France, Cadieax, and Allen (1995) contended that some of the primary benefits of the therapeutic letter are that they ensure the counselor has accurately heard the client’s story and to encourage the counselor to be reflective about the counseling session outside of the fast paced environment of therapeutic
interviewing. Therapeutic letters also provide an indelible and tangible context for emerging stories that are generated in the therapeutic conversation to become more newsworthy (evidence of the difference ends up in the client’s hands), and expands the counselor-client relationship outside of the confines of the therapeutic hour and the counseling room into the confines of the client’s life.

Research about therapeutic letter writing suggests that therapeutic letters contribute to client change by strengthening stories of change and difference, or “news of difference” (Bateson, 1972), enhancing the collaborative nature of the therapeutic alliance (Andrews et al., 1997) and creating an audience to reinforce the emergence of a narrative where problems have less of an influence on client experience (Bell et al., 2009). White and Epston (1990) supported this position, stating that the use of documents such as letters encourages the idea that news of change is occurring beyond the parameters of the therapeutic hour and room. Bell et al. (2009) and Pyle (2009) both contended that the two primary purposes of therapeutic letters are to share alternative ideas and heighten attention on specific themes within the client’s story (saturate the client in his or her themes that support the creation of potential self-chosen solutions) and to create relational space for the therapist to be transparent about his or her experience of the client’s story and its impact upon him or her as a co-traveler.

Goldberg (2000) provided an example of therapeutic letter writing with “troubled adolescents” (p. 63), explaining that letters that focus on the client’s life as opposed to dealing primarily with the clients’ maladies have a greater therapeutic value in the experience of client lives. Goldberg explained that what gives a letter therapeutic value
are the following: (a) the degree to which it is client centered, (b) how it speaks to significant information from the session, (c) whether or not it infuses the client with news of progress, and (d) how it expands the client’s hope and optimism in relationship to the concerns they are experiencing in their lives. Moules (2000) expanded Goldberg’s suggestion about effective letter writing in counseling relationships, explaining that letters have the potential to support clients in seeing how far they have come in their therapeutic journey and provide a detailed portfolio of significant landmarks in their counseling journey, documenting how the client is changing and/or has changed over time.

McLeod (1997) documented the use of therapeutic letters as a designed attempt on the part of the counselor to provide a substitute account of the client’s life narrative and create enough space (externalization) to aid the client in freeing himself or herself from the limiting confines of the problem’s influence in their life. Counseling letters also concentrate on supporting clients in seeing how they are living their lives in relationship to the problem and how they might create a more preferred reality that supports them in living out the creation of solutions due to the uncovering of personal strengths. Emphasis in the letters is placed on the invaluable nature of language and discourse and how “things are talked into being” (Heritage, 1984, p. 290), suggesting that letter writing spreads the conversation outside of the counseling session, creating expanded opportunities to collaboratively nurture the client’s emerging beingness into a more preferred and livable reality. McLeod (1997) posited that the counselor or author of the
letter must take a stance of warmth, humanity, and a concern for empowering the client toward his or her areas of strength and wisdom.

The narrative-framed letter then is concerned with collaborating with the client to create and strengthen this preferred story or alternative reality in the client’s experience and to develop and sharpen this story so that it can be lived in the client’s life and relationships outside of the context of the counseling relationship. Weingarten (1992) hypothesized that therapeutic letters invite the client and therapist to participate more fully in the co-creation of shared meaning, which is often viewed as a hallmark of intimacy, mutuality, and relationally responsive practice (Shotter, 1993).

**Contemporary Directions: Writing Letters to Clients**

Contemporary literature concerning letter writing practice in counseling (Amundson, 2001; Bell et al., 2009; Epston, 2009; Erlingsson, 2009; Moules, 2002, 2009; Pyle, 2009; Rodgers, 2009; Rombach, 2003) supported the premise of this study, suggesting that clinical letter writing appears to have some positive impact in the practice of therapy and most importantly, in the lives of clients who are receiving letters from their counselors. Consistent themes that exist in the current research concerning letter writing practice in counseling are: (a) encouraging post-session reflection in the client’s experience as well as in the counselor’s attitudes and conceptualization of the client’s story (Bell et al., 2009); (b) efficacy of letter writing to replace rigid, impersonal boundaries between counselor and client (Rodgers, 2009); and (c) therapeutic letters and their impact on the client-counselor relationship, co-creating sufficient intimacy that supports the client and counselor in developing a genuine joining with one another that
engenders the client’s willingness to disclose their most authentic self in the counseling experience (Rodgers, 2009). The literature additionally spoke to the importance of using client-shaped metaphors and client language to capture the client’s attention and the potential for therapeutic letters to increase client curiosity about their own lives. Therapeutic letters also serve to document aspects of the client story where new meanings and alternative possibilities are considered experientially by the client (Rodgers, 2009). Moules (2009) suggested that contemporary letter writing in clinical practice highlights the counselor’s intentional and theoretically informed choice to underline client strengths as opposed to documenting failures. Moules further indicated that through letters, clients are invited to separate themselves from a languaging of self as being deficient and incapable toward a more preferred revision of self as being worthy and deserving of nurturing alternatives.

David Epston (personal communication, April 8, 2010) explained that professional counselors have been writing “letters” (or case files) from time immemorial. Writing a personal letter to a client regarding the therapy process reduces the counselor’s dependence on the omniscient professional gaze that typically objectifies the client through the form of a case note written about the client and invites the counselor to be in relationship with the client through the after-session, reflecting process. Epston suggested that in a sense, the counselor is democratizing text, making it more accessible for the client to be a co-participant in the shared experience of therapy. In addition, Epston stated that counselors who write letters to clients with the intent to support therapeutic growth are able to textualize their thoughts in conversation with clients in
between counseling sessions. This then becomes a double reflection of the client’s story, where the counselor conceptualizes the process and their own practice with the client, which increases therapist accountability and models appropriate transparency for the client.

Pyle (2009) pointed to the importance of the counselor sharing his or her experience of the client and their story and to validate what is happening in the client’s experience, both in the session and outside of it. This lends itself toward therapist disclosure of a horizontal nature (Yalom, 1998), suggesting that transparency about the in-betweeness of the counselor-client relationship and the thoughts and feelings in the counselor in response to the client’s experience and the inclusion of this disclosure in the letter can have therapeutic value in the client’s life and on the therapeutic relationship. Client responses to the practice of letter writing in counseling relationships speak to the client’s interest in an available counselor, where the client senses they have access to not just the counselor as professional, but also are able to connect to the person of the counselor as well (Pyle, 2009). Letter writing practice, currently, reflects the counselor’s sensitive attunement to the client’s experiencing and to the fluidity of the therapeutic conversations linking counselor to client and client to counselor. The therapeutic letter then is an extension of this degree of relational attunement (Mearns & Cooper, 2005), wherein the therapeutic dialogue that is being created in session is more transferable to the client’s outside reality.

This section discussed the origins and subsequent application of written documents as a supplemental part of the therapeutic relationship between counselor and
client. Whereas letter writing continues to be practiced with clients in various settings and from various theoretical perspectives, historical and contemporary research suggests that it is often perceived by clients as an effective dimension of the treatment process. In order to contextualize this research, I discuss the narrative orientation and its impact on the growth of clinical letter writing due to the fact that it is the primary contemporary influence in the field of therapeutic letter writing (Epston, 1994, 2009, 2010; White & Epston, 1990). The following section provides a summary of the narrative approach to therapy and philosophy concerning the composition and utility of letter writing in clinical practice with clients.

**Letter Writing in a Narrative Context**

Sitting here at my computer screen with my finger touching the keys of my keyboard has always seemed like ‘touching’ the other in thought and sentiment. I doubt if there has ever been a letter I have written that has not brought me closer to those with whom I was in correspondence. (David Epston, 2010, p. 92)

The narrative approach (White, 1988; Tomm, 1987, 1989; White & Epston, 1989), like humanism, is also conceptualized as an approach, or a way of being with others. Narrative thinking is primarily interested with the establishment of a mutual and egalitarian relationship between counselor and client that is designed around the creation of a conversation that supports the client(s) in constructing an alternate or more preferred view of their problems by highlighting attempts toward the creation of meaningful solutions that have been slightly out of the client’s awareness and/or obscured by problem-focused views of self and the world. Clients are believed to be the experts in their lives and the primary authors of their story or stories (Tomm, 1989). The clinician
support the client(s) in creating a shift in the client’s dominant story that is often problem-drenched toward alternative stories that include resources and strengths, client resiliency, recognition of preferred possibilities that include client choosing, and a life without the problem’s heavy influence on/in their experience.

An important aspect of the narrative approach to counseling is its interest in extending the therapeutic conversation, systemically, to levels of community within the client’s journey toward problem resolution (White & Epston, 1989). This perspective takes into consideration the complexity of influence community can have in the client’s story, both at the level of problem-maintenance and/or solution creation and in the subsequent maintenance of the client’s preferred narrative(s) for living.

The narrative approach conceptualizes individual difficulties as being created and preserved by oppressive stories that exact a suffocating influence on the person’s life (Epston & White, 1992). As a consequence, human maladies are shaped when the manner in which individuals’ lives are storied, or created, by themselves and others becomes incongruent with their actual lived experience(s). Therapeutic involvement then looks like a collaboration where the counselor and client work to open room in the client’s life to support clients in assuming a more active role in the authorship of a more preferred reality or story. It is hoped that the client can successfully shift marginalized aspects of self and identity toward greater possibilities to control their own life and to create meaningful solutions that are prescriptive for their problems (Bruner, 1986). Narrative also pays close attention to the language practices people adopt in order to story their lives, the sense people make of their experiences and the meanings they attach to
experience (and as a consequence, to their identity), and the power relationships clients find themselves in.

Drawing upon some of the works of Foucault (1979), the narrative approach views people as being, at times, unconsciously enlisted into a suppressed existence due to power practices that include evaluation and constant comparison in a context of cultural and/or social standards and expectations (White, 1988). Clients are supported through narrative counseling to explore and gain awareness about dismissed or marginalized aspects of themselves and of their experience and ultimately are invited to examine preferred ways of being that are more harmonious and in sync with their favored self-narrative.

Postmodern theories such as social construction influence the narrative perspective and map out an ideology concerning how people develop problems and, ultimately, develop a problem-free story in the therapeutic experience. Gergen (1994) pointed to the significance of narratives and the language people use to story their lives, suggesting that the narratives people generate and carry are reflective of and shaping of the client’s life. The narratives comment on client experience and play a significant role in informing personal perceptions and consequent behaviors (Gergen, 1994).

Gergen (1999) suggested that a goal of a postmodern stance would be to support clients into cultivating a diversity of narratives and to deepen the complexity within these narratives, which can lead to “liberating implications” (p. 174) in a person’s life. Gergen stressed the importance of looking within client stories for language practices clients use that are reflective of viewing the self through a lens of deficit and to consistently
challenge client language in an attempt to reframe stories of deficit into stories that
contain multiplicity, gaps, silences, and room for alternative possibilities that point the
client toward strengths. Speaking to the importance of languaging in client experience,
R. Miller (1993) contended that narrative counselors intentionally use language as a
facilitative medium for transformation in client experience, demanding the artful creation
of intentional questions rather than an insistence upon offering solutions. Laube (1998)
furthered the narrativist stance on language, explaining that language practice influences
people’s perceptions of who they are, contributing to the way people feel about
themselves and their relationships with others and the world.

Mahoney (2003) explained that people often hold a perspective, through
disempowering cultural practices, of being the “bearers or vehicles of [their] lives” (p.
100) but lacking a perspective of self as being the primary author. The consequence of
this perspective is that clients live with a great deal of unawareness about the stories they
are generating and subsequently living out. Narrative practice then suggests that the
primary task of the therapist is to assist clients in reowning their authority so that they can
author different and perhaps more satisfying dimensions into their lives.

White and Epston (1990) explained that the therapist and client strive for a
consultative and co-authoring experience in people’s attempts toward change—a
relational encounter that makes room for the existence of client fears, despair, and other
existential questions that can emerge in the landscape of client stories. The counseling
alliance becomes a facilitative medium by which the client’s restorying processes are
viewed as the primary catalyst for change.
A primary therapeutic approach used in narrative counseling is the use of reflective questioning. White (1993) explained that questioning helps the client to deconstruct, or to crack open the pervasive stories that constrain or limit preferences and choosing. Neimeyer (1993) added to this, suggesting that narrative therapists rely on questions to support clients in expanding their stories and practice nonjudgmental listening to aid clients in viewing their stories more objectively. Tomm (1988) introduced the idea of reflexive questioning, which is an attempt by the therapist to invite thoughtful reflection about relational meaning(s) that emerge from clients who are conceptualized as the expert in their own experience.

White (1995) suggested that the narrative perspective, concerning client interpretation of experiences, is interested in helping clients to “step more into” (p. 19) stories that are viewed as potentially being more preferred and to exercise choice in ways that invite them to fully perform or carry out these possibilities that are lodged inside of these alternative stories. In order to support people to be in a conversation about how their problem(s) are impacting their life, the narrative therapist aids clients in experiencing enough of a shift, intrapersonally, that helps the client to separate from their problems so that they can detach themselves from viewing the problem as an integral part of their personhood (White, 1995). People are ultimately encouraged to distance themselves sufficiently from a problem-oriented view of self and to nurture alternative ways of viewing the self that are oriented around strengths and preferences.

According to White (1995), the primary tasks of counseling through the narrative lens is to aid clients in some of the following ways: (a) exploring how problems are
impacting their functioning, (b) facilitating the expression of lived experiences that were not consistent with the dominant and problematic narrative in the client’s life, (c) supporting clients in gaining awareness about their internal conversations or aiding clients in seeing how they conceptualize themselves as the problem versus the problem being independent of them and having influence in the client’s story, and (d) externalizing the problem-saturated narrative, aiding the client in imagining a possible identity that exists apart from the problem, thus diminishing the potency of the problem’s influence on the client (the problem can no longer speak the “truth” about the client and his or her relationships) and creating space for the client to alter their relationship with their problems.

White (1995) additionally suggested that other important features of the narrative approach in the use of therapeutic letters in the counseling relationship are to collaborate with the client about preferred stories in the client’s life and the development of these stories, providing opportunities for clients to create or author a more rich and meaningful way of living, to co-construct the scaffolding to support and strengthen these preferred stories through the use of encouragement, and supporting the client to share the “news of difference” (Bateson, 1972) or therapeutic change to outside audiences such as family members and friends.

An important objective of the use of narrative-oriented letters in counseling is to facilitate a therapeutic terrain that aids the client in being able to mutually construct a narrative with preferred outcomes or a narrative that consists of multiple accounts strung together over time in the client’s life, reinforcing the client’s ability to live this story
outside of the topography of the counseling room. Fundamentally, the narrative therapist aids the client not in replacing one story with another but in encouraging the client to participate more fully in the continuous creation and process of transforming meaning in their day to day lives (Gergen, 1996).

The concept and counseling practice of therapeutic letters are most typically accredited to postmodern practice, specifically, narrative therapy and are often aligned with the work of David Epston and Michael White (White & Epston, 1990). Epston (1994) began writing therapeutic letters when he worked with families and adolescents at an outpatient psychiatric clinic in New Zealand in the late 1970s. He explained that letters are “organically intertwined” (White & Epston, 1990, p. 23) with the counseling process and the therapeutic partnership between counselor and client. Letters written to clients during the counseling experience supported clients in re-authoring practices that focused on client strengths and making previously subjugated storylines more present in client lives. The narrative assumption (White & Epston, 1990) suggests that “problem” storylines usurp people’s thinking, and life experiences are, as a consequence, interpreted through a lens of problems. Epston (1994) stated that narrative letters in counseling reinforce the creation of therapeutic space, encouraging the practice of reauthoring conversations that aid the client in bringing about new ways of viewing their lives, in a landscape less saturated by problems. Epston (1994) explained that therapeutic letters additionally concretize client change and augment client movement toward therapeutic goals.
White and Epston (1990) linked letter writing in counseling with language, suggesting that people have short-term memory capabilities that are comprised of about 7 to 10 words, and written language extends the limits, expanding the amount of information people are able to process. Epston (1994) expanded the invaluable aspects of written language in the client’s therapeutic experience, suggesting that the words in a letter do not fade or disappear the way conversation does; they continue on through space and time, paying homage to the therapeutic experience, preserving it through writing. Instead of viewing the therapeutic letter as a technique or skill the narrative counselor uses in therapy, Epston (1994) and Payne (2000) conceptualized the therapy process and letter writing as inseparable components of the therapeutic partnership. Letter writing practice is not merely an intervention slotted into the narrative counselor’s repertoire but is instead indicative of a different way of being with the client and understanding what therapy is and what it should be (Payne, 2000). Writing therapeutic letters with clients enables the counselor to reimagine counseling practice from a more social-oriented perspective that combats against the erosion of collective and communal forms of life and being in relationship.

In addition to the work of Epston and White (Epston, 1994; Epston & White, 1992; White & Epston, 1989, 1990), a review of previous and current literature concerning therapeutic letter writing through the narrative lens reveals a wealth of information about its utility in counseling practice. Some key features that run consistently throughout the literature concerning the functionality and composition of letters written to clients from a narrative perspective are: (a) the importance of the
counselor’s stance in the relationship, being primarily an orientation toward curiosity about the client’s life and the use of tentative and speculative language that creates additional space for possibilities in the client’s story; (b) the use of therapeutic letters to consolidate stories of change and difference and to encourage the creation of an audience in the client’s life to reinforce the existence of this new story (Andrews et al., 1997); (c) encouraging and maintaining client’s attempts to re-author their experience through the therapeutic process (Freedman & Combs, 1996), (d) using written statements to provide thick descriptions about the influence of the problem(s) on the client’s life (Nylund & Thomas, 1994), and (e) to document and augment unique outcomes or exceptions in the client’s story that are expressed in the counseling session, pointing out to clients times when they are writing in a way that is counter to the more problem-dominant story in their life.

Additional themes regarding the narrative approach to therapeutic letters in the counseling relationship are the importance of supporting clients in creating meaningful solutions to problems, encouraging clients to distance themselves from a deficit-oriented view of self or self-as-problem and to explore alternative ways of viewing the self (Moules, 2009), using letters to support client and therapist in the participation and co-creation of shared meaning (Rodgers, 2009; Shilts & Ray, 1991; Weingarten, 1992), and emphasizing client language practices and focusing on how things are talked, such as problems or solutions, into being (Heritage, 1984). Other features of therapeutic letters written from a narrative orientation are: (a) punctuating new stories being expressed in the counseling experience (Parry & Doan, 1994); (b) providing an alternative account or
a written re-framing of client’s life story, externalizing the dominant, oppressive narrative within which a client might be living (McLeod, 1997); (c) sharing reflections about recent conversations in therapy with the client (White & Epston, 1990); (d) using letters as a medium to support clients in substituting the language of deficit in their stories (Gergen, 1990); (e) explicitly pointing to gaps in the client’s story and encouraging the client to consider these in order for their story to be performed more fully (Epston & White, 1992); (f) and utilizing reflective questioning practices to encourage clients into an unexplored landscape and to mutually work toward problem resolution and the co-creation of a more preferred reality, continually pointing to the client’s responsibility to be the final editor of each letter (Rombach, 2003).

In one of their first works together, Epston and White (1989) wrote about the therapeutic efficacy of letters in narrative counseling practice.

Letters constitute a medium rather than a particular genre and as such can be employed for any number of purposes . . . In a storied therapy, the letters are used primarily for the purpose of rendering lived experience into a narrative or “story,” one that makes sense according to the criteria of coherence and lifelikeness. By professional letters, I am referring to those communications between professionals about persons and their problems. Typically, the persons who are subjects of these letters are excluded from any access to this record, even though their futures may be shaped by it. In a storied therapy, the letters are a version of that co-constructed reality called therapy and become the shared property of all the parties to it” (pp. 125-126).
In their article about creating relational case notes, Andrews et al. (1997) suggested that language practices clinicians use when talking about clients in a case note have the potential to impact the way a counselor relates to his or her client. They additionally added that by using a letter as a case note, it encourages the counselor to stay in the relationship with the client by writing to them about the counseling experience, sharing ideas and showing transparency, maintaining some subjectivity in the relationship as opposed to viewing the client entirely objectively. This medium of writing about client experiences through a case note in the form of a letter to the client written by the counselor is shared with the client, giving them unambiguous access to the storying process of the therapy experience, empowering the client to maintain authorship in their experience, both in and outside of the counseling environment. Epston and White (1989) highlighted the significance of honoring and respecting client experiences, and therapeutic letters assisted with creating a bridge between client experiences outside of the counseling environment and change processes that are storied in therapy, thus keeping the client immersed in change rather than falling back into problematic ways of thinking and behaving (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

The Family Nursing Unit located at the University of Calgary has employed letter writing practice with families in a hospital setting for over 20 years (Wright et al., 1996). Wright et al. (1996) and Moules (2000) explained that clinical letters written to these families (that involved some member of the family experiencing illness) created additional space for a more collaborative and disclosing therapeutic partnership with clients. Some of the key components that constitute the letters they write to families are:
to offer commendations, or acknowledgements of individual and family strengths and resources (where there is a series of evidences, over time, of these strengths), to share with the families how they have impacted and taught the clinicians working with them, to reinforce in-session ideas, and to propose suggestions and offer questions that keep the family reflecting about movement toward solutions. Therapeutic letters were additionally mailed to patients to highlight and honor change, to dispute constraining beliefs (such as self-defeating or disempowering attitudes) and underline facilitating beliefs (thinking and values that are conducive of client change processes), to admit therapeutic mistakes, and to persistently confront the clinician’s own attitudes and beliefs in the counseling relationship (Wright et al., 1996).

Moules (2000) suggested that letters ultimately keep the client in relationship with the clinician and vice versa and reflect an active, reciprocal commitment to the therapeutic alliance. William Decker (1998) wrote about the medium of letters, stating that a letter is peculiar, “by the space it provides for imagining the ways in which one may exist in reciprocity with others” (p. 241). The narrative perspective concerning the use of letter writing is multiple in its scope and utility for counseling practice. A unifying and consistent feature is the narrative letter writer’s concern for reciprocity and relationship and an honoring of mutuality in the client’s attempts toward creating and maintaining a more preferred story in their life.

**Therapeutic Letter Writing Through a Conceptual Lens of Humanism**

What one tries to do in writing a letter . . . [is] to give back a reflection of the other person. (Virginia Woolf, as cited in Nicolson & Trautman, 1978, p. 98)
Admonishing her friend Ethel Smith in writing, Virginia Woolf wrote, “Receiving letters protects against feelings of missing the other . . . I miss [your letters] when they don’t come.” (Nicolson & Trautman, 1978, p. 211)

Humanistic psychology, often described as the “third force” in psychology, developed, initially, as a reaction to scientific psychology and behaviorism that tended to objectify human experience. Humanistic psychology emphasizes human experience and places value on the pursuit of meaning and the innate potential for individuals to grow and change in health-promoting ways. In addition to a valuing and trusting stance toward human functioning, Carl Rogers (1961) and Abraham Maslow (1954, 1966, 1968) differentiated the humanistic approach from other counseling orientations on the basis of the therapeutic impact of a facilitative relationship between the client and counselor that contains certain interpersonal characteristics and the potential for this alliance to lead to experiential awareness and the development of internal inclinations toward self-actualization.

The foundational perspective concerning humanistic psychology comes from its philosophical orientation of humanism which is primarily interested in understanding the phenomenological material expressed by people. Humanism suggests that human issues can only be fully understood when a human and personal perspective is taken in order to understand the reality as it is experienced by the individual person (Bugental, 1991, 1999). The inner potential of persons to grow across all domains of development, including emotional, spiritual, physical, and interpersonal, is an important perspective held in the therapeutic relationship between counselor and client (Rogers, 1961). In addition, humanistic psychology posits that individuals have the capacity to be
increasingly aware of oneself as a unique, functioning, and worthwhile person. This is often referred to as self-actualization, or becoming increasingly closer to one’s potential (Rogers, 1961). This belief in the actualized self suggests that persons have some control over their lives, that they are conscious participants in a process of ongoing growth processes, and that they possess the capacities to move beyond externally imposed limitations that can potentially interfere with optimal self-directed functioning.

Humanistic psychology concerns itself with supporting persons in understanding meaningful and satisfying alternatives to problems of living so that persons can grow optimally in a direction that is consistent with one’s inner nature and potential.

The humanistic perspective concerns itself primarily with careful attention to the subtleties in human experience. Rogers (1961) suggested that, “When all are regarded as object, the subjective individual, the inner self, the person in the process of becoming . . . is weakened, devalued, or destroyed” (pp. 213-214). The humanistic orientation to counseling concerns itself primarily with a valuing stance toward human experiential diversity and the subtle ways in which people strive to express their inner self.

Humanistic counseling is interested in a deeper understanding of the person as a whole, suggesting that individuals supersede the sum of their parts (Bugental, 1964b) and that those characteristics that make a person uniquely himself or herself are imperative to the humanistic premium placed on understanding a person in his or her individuality versus explanatory methods of knowing a person. Bugental (1964a) further suggested that humanism is concerned with human beings and their interpersonal potential and the opportunities, socially and culturally, to the experiential realization of this potential.
Humanistic counseling views human capacities and potentialities such as love, affection, creativity, self-actualization, warmth, meaning, transcendental experience, psychological health, basic needs-gratification, humor, and caring as the foundational premise by which clients are conceptualized (Bugental, 1964a, 1967, 1976, 1978, 1987; Sutich, 1962). Further, a humanistic orientation toward being in a therapeutic relationship presupposes that meaning is more imperative than procedure, suggesting that the humanistic counselor concerns themselves with meaningful issues in the human condition and strives to approach individuals with a deep concern to understand another’s unique experience of being human and to suspend judgment and bias that would short-circuit understanding.

In James Bugental’s (1964b) closing statement to the American Association for Humanistic Psychology in 1963, he expressed his sentiment about the need for the humanistic approach in counseling, saying, “We . . . need much thought, much imagination, much discussion and argument, much creativity—in short, much of being human to bring our perspective to the place it must have as an affirmation of [a person’s] respect for [a person]” (p. 25). Maslow (1966) explained, “There is no substitute for experience . . . I must approach a person as an individual, unique and peculiar, as the sole member of [their] class” (pp. 10, 45). The humanistic lens offers a philosophical approach to knowing, to being with another, and to being with oneself in relationship to another that is concerned primarily with personal attitudes as opposed to professional training or technical skill or theoretical methodology.
The humanistically-oriented counselor strives to establish a person-to-person relationship with the client that is made distinctive through the existence of counselor attitudes of warmth, genuineness or realness in the relationship, empathic understanding, or a willingness to face the client’s factors within oneself and to communicate something of this experience in the relationship with the client, and an honest expression of interpersonal regard for the client’s total experience (Rogers, 1961). A counselor operating from the humanistic tradition additionally strives to a depth of valuing and respect for the client and his or her culturally unique experience. Mearns and Cooper (2005) suggested that psychological distress is the consequence of an individual’s inability to experience relational depth with others. Humanistic counseling is primarily concerned with the co-creation of a relationship between counselor and client that has specific qualities that enable the partnership to be mutative in the client’s experiential world. Terms such as deep soul nourishment (Hyener, 1991) and working at relational depth (Mearns & Cooper, 2005) are extensions of humanistic practice with clients that speak to the importance of a flexible, personal, and relationship-centered experience that focuses on connecting with the client in an authentic and valuing way, eliminating the distinctions between “us,” the healer, or the counselor, and “them,” the afflicted, or the client (Yalom, 2002).

Humanistic counseling provides a theoretically-sound reaction concerning the use of professional boundaries that may limit the potency of the therapeutic relationship (Winnicott, 1958). Lewin (1994) suggested that the most common and deleterious boundary violations in the counseling alliance are those of excessive therapist distance
rather than ones of overinvolvement. Humanistic counseling provides an ethically sound lens through which to conceptualize relatedness in the counseling experience. The primary value of the humanistically-oriented therapeutic relationship is that it facilitates a richer, more consciously and compassionately held relationship with oneself. The connection between the deepening of the client’s relationship with himself or herself and the maturing therapeutic relationship is a synergistic one. According to Satir (1987), the therapeutic relationship embodies “the meeting of the deepest self of the therapist with the deepest self of the client” (p. 17). Humanistic counseling invites the counselor to make more of themselves available to the client for the purpose of providing enough background information about the counselor that enables the client to relate to the counselor in a mutual and personal way (Buhler, 1970).

This research is interested with the infusion of humanistic beliefs into letters written by the counselor that are mailed to the client in-between counseling sessions and the consequent experiences of the clients who are recipients of these letters. The use of counseling letters enables the humanistic practitioner to potentially expand the counselor-client relationship, crossing the boundary of time by extending the work clients and counselors do in a counseling session into the real-world context where clients live their day-to-day lives. Writing therapeutic letters to clients between sessions also is a marker of relational responsivity (Shotter, 1993), or an interpersonal posture held by the counselor in the therapeutic relationship, where the letter writing is primarily concerned with the quality of connection with the client. The counselor’s responsiveness expressed in the form of an intentional letter can become a mutative activity with client preferences
being the central aspect of the experience. Letter writing provides an additional modality for the humanistic clinician to honor the interpersonal nature of the counselor-client alliance and reflects the counselor’s attunement to the client and their experiences, inside and outside of the counseling environment.

Currently in the mental health profession, only 10% of clinical counselors identify themselves as “humanistic,” with person-centered counselors being a subset of this group (Cain, 2001). Even though Rogers continues to be consistently named as the primary influence amongst practicing psychologists (Psychotherapy Networker, 2008, March/April), a large majority of clinical training programs throughout the United States are purported to marginalize and/or discount Carl Rogers and his contributions to the advancement of therapeutic processes and his concerns about the attitudes of the developing counselor that facilitate a therapeutic environment for client experiences (Cain, 2001; Elkins, 2007). In his recent book about humanistic psychology, David Elkins (2009) began by asking the question, “Whatever happened to Carl Rogers?” (p. 7). Rogers’ core ideas reverberate through counselor training programs and counselor practice whenever discussion is concerned with therapist attitudes and characteristics, the significance of the therapeutic relationship between counselor and client(s), and the importance of contextual factors as it relates to therapeutic outcomes (Cain, 2001; Elkins, 2009; Rogers, Gendlin, Kieseler, & Traux, 1967; Wampold, 2001). Whereas many in the field of counselor education suggest that Rogers’ ideas and contributions to the humanistic approach to counseling are out of date and no longer sufficient for client
change (Elkin, 2009), I would suggest that it is possible that the depth of his theory is not thoroughly grasped as it relates to counselor development and client change and growth.

Carl Rogers (1942, 1957, 1959, 1961, 1973) proposed a somewhat austere formula with radical potential to alter human relationships and client experience. Rogers (1961) explained that if clinicians are willing to rescind their authority (perceived or real) over others and strive to mutually build an interpersonal environment with another made distinctive by empathy, unconditional positive regard of the other (and of oneself), and genuineness, remarkable things are likely to transpire. He further suggested that when people are able to more deeply realize their own inner resources and seeming latent potentiality, they have a tendency to come more alive, to move out from behind unsatisfying facades, and to grow in life-giving and variable yet personally significant ways (Rogers, 1961, 1980). The therapist can embrace many stances with the client in the counseling relationship. One position would be the counselor who is an expert who instructs clients how to solve their problems and constructively go about living their lives in an abbreviated manner. Rogers (1980) suggested that a humanistically-oriented counselor strives to have an unfettering attitude, whereby they trustingly support the client’s power and potential to free themselves up from the inside, to trust more fully in their organism and in their actualizing tendencies to grow in useful and life-enriching ways, to make self-chosen decisions that are more consistent with clarified values and emerging needs, to disentangle problems creatively, and to ultimately become more completely who they are.
Rogers (1942) summarized the existential journey the counselor and client take, together.

The individual and not the problem is the focus. The aim is not to solve one particular problem, but to assist the individual to grow, so that [he/she] can cope with the present problem and with latter problems in a better-integrated fashion . . . Therapy is not a matter of doing something to the individual, or of inducing [him/her] to do something about [himself or herself]. It is instead a matter of freeing [him/her] for normal growth and development, of removing obstacles so that he can again move forward (pp. 28-29).

While Carl Rogers (1980) and his ideas most accurately represent the person-centered approach to counseling practice, his ideas also fall into a larger umbrella of counseling philosophy and thought viewed as humanism, an ideology shared by other existential-humanistic practitioners such as Otto Rank, James Bugental, R.D. Laing, Irvin Yalom, Abraham Maslow, and Rollo May. In addition to the basic postulates of humanism that Bugental (1964b) conceptualized as being defining characteristics of a humanistic attitude toward human nature, a primary and consistent feature of humanistic thought about counseling is the emphasis on the nature and quality of the relationship between counselor and client. While the perspectives amongst humanistic practitioners concerning the therapeutic relationship are varied, there is a shared vision about the relationship as being mutative in client experience and a heightened interest in nurturing and growing the quality of relatedness between counselor and client throughout the therapeutic experience (Krug, 2009).
In Bruce Wampold’s (2001) ground-breaking study within the realm of psychotherapy, he found, through decades of research and meta-analyses of hundreds of studies concerning determinants of therapeutic effectiveness, that specific factors are the primary contributors to effective psychotherapeutic practice. He described in his findings that the two primary debates concerning what makes psychotherapy effective are the medical model approach and the contextual model. The medical model is concerned primarily with the therapist providing specific techniques to the client to aid them in reducing underlying symptomology. The contextual model is an approach concerned with *contextual factors*, or deliberate attention to the therapeutic alliance between counselor and client, client expectations, the existence of a theoretical rationale and accompanying methods, and the characteristics and personal attitudes of the therapist in the counseling relationship. This contextual model suggests that techniques have very little to do with client change and therapeutic outcome and that the above mentioned factors are the primary determinants of client-reported effective psychotherapy.

Wampold’s (2001) study also concluded that no therapeutic techniques are more or less effective than other techniques, pointing to the reality that technical expertise on the part of the counselor, in and of itself, has minimal impact as it relates to therapeutic benefits. Wampold does not deny the correlation between therapeutic outcomes and theoretical soundness and technique, but he explained that precursory to technique and theory being effectual, the primary foundation for therapeutic effectiveness is the strength and trustworthiness of the alliance between counselor and client. Wampold additionally
spoke to the importance of certain therapist attitudes and characteristics to exist in the counseling relationship.

In their 1991 study in which the differences were examined between less effective and more effective counselor trainees, Lafferty, Beutler, and Crago found that the primary variable that differentiated these two groups was the quality of empathy that existed in each of the two groups. The study revealed that lower levels of empathy were found in less effective therapists, whereas clients who worked with more effective therapists reported that they felt more understood by their counselor and greater levels of empathic attunement in the counseling partnership.

Burns and Nolen-Hoeksema (1992) conducted a similar study, examining the function of empathy in the counseling experiences of clients struggling with depression while being treated by counselors working from a cognitive-behavioral perspective. Their findings revealed that, “The patients of therapists who were the warmest and the most empathic improved significantly more than the patients of the therapists with the lowest empathy ratings” (p. 447). The significance of these two studies is that they point to the importance of the contextual factor of therapist-provided conditions of empathy and its relationship to significant outcomes in client experience.

Asay and Lambert’s study (1999) confirmed Wampold’s study (2001), suggesting that only 15% of the variance in psychotherapeutic outcomes is due to the actual techniques used by the counselor. Humanistic psychology lends itself not only to the implementation of techniques that are sensitive to the client’s landscape but, most
importantly, to the other contextual factors that contribute to client outcomes, specifically, relationship factors and personal characteristics of the counselor and client.

The humanistic perspective concerning the therapeutic situation is primarily interested in a deeply human experience of two or more persons reaching out to each other in a growth-oriented experience; a reaching for help and a genuine reaching back to extend, sensitively, caring and support (Laing, 1965; May, 1958; May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958; Yalom, 1998). Carl Rogers (1961) explained his hypothesis concerning the importance of the therapeutic relationship for client-directed change, stating, “If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth, and change and personal development will occur” (p. 33). Otto Rank (1958) suggested that a therapeutic relationship is characterized by one person helping another to develop and grow, without infringing too much on the other’s personality. Humanistic psychology is interested in human factors as the potent force in client experience such as the depth of the partnership between counselor and client and the qualities and characteristics of the therapist (Elkins, 2007). It is not theories and techniques that reconcile client suffering but the highly personal dimensions of therapy and the encounter that happens between counselor and client as they mutually explore the client’s problems of living. In a recent book about existential-integrative therapeutic practice, Schneider and Krug (2010) suggested that the principles of humanistic therapy may be needed by all therapists because they offer a perspective that potentially contributes to the basis of all effective counseling treatment. It should be noted here that there are many different conceptual approaches to aiding
clients in the therapy experience with problems of living, and they can be equally
effective with respect to helping clients achieve meaningful goals in counseling. This
study examines aspects of humanistic psychology in conjunction with writing letters to
clients during the counseling experience to support well being and achievement of
therapeutic goals.

Carl Rogers (1980) related a story about plants, suggesting that the organismic
tendency is shared by all living things, including plants, animals, and humans. He
described a potato that shoots forth sprouts in a basement environment with minimally
optimal conditions for growth to describe a central aspect of humanistic psychology: the
actualizing tendency of the organism. He suggested that even in an environment with
very few conditions to facilitate optimal growth, such as sunlight, vitamin-rich soil, fresh
air, and moisture, the potato is still able to actualize some of its actualizing potential by
seeking a small piece of light that comes through a crevice in the wall, enabling the
organism to grow, to some extent of its potential, tapping into some of its latent
possibilities.

Abraham Maslow (1968) furthered this notion of self-actualization, suggesting
that in order to fully actualize, people often have to leave familiar circumstances behind
and explore new possibilities in life, which requires courage, commitment, and a capacity
to expand one’s ability to take risks. Rogers (1959) suggested that within this unfamiliar
landscape of living, people have a tendency to increasingly learn to attune to what they
perceive is internally or organismically best for them. However, due to a lack of
growth-conducive conditions in a person’s environment and the existence of a plethora of
extrinsic, society created conditions that shape how a person relates to oneself, people have a tendency to deny this internal tendency to grow in meaningful and health-giving ways.

The humanistic approach to counseling is concerned with helping a person recognize how they relate to and with themselves through a lens that is often shaped by society (family, peers, institutions, community, culture, media, etc.) that gives messages to a person about what makes a “good” or “worthy” person and alienates a person from internal messages of self-regard and self-acceptance. As a person is able to experience the consistent presence of conditions in the therapeutic environment such as empathy, presence, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness, the client is able to learn how to avoid restricting their organismic needs and emotions because of preconceived notions of how they should be. Rogers (1961) suggested that as a person’s actualizing tendencies are expanded into client awareness, clients are able to choose, with greater clarity, what is personally right for themselves. He viewed this actualizing process as enabling a person to become increasingly aware of a flow of ongoing internal change with a simultaneously parallel process of deep acceptance of oneself, others, and the world. These necessary and sufficient conditions for client growth and change were described by Rogers (1961, 1980) as being an attitude of empathy, unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and presence.

Rogers (1980) emphasized the importance of therapist attitudes and described empathy from the conceptualization of viewing it as an attitude that a counselor is able to grow into and develop and nurture over time. He described empathy as the willingness of
the counselor to face the client’s factors within himself or herself and to communicate
something of this experience back to the client in a way that it is able to resonate in the
client’s subjective experience. Within this attitude of deep interest in the client’s
experience is the therapist’s capacity to accurately sense both the feelings and meanings
that are in the client’s sharing, not just responding intellectually to the content of client
messages but most importantly to the feelings that lie underneath what they are saying.
The counselor is able to, for a time, live in the client’s private world, understanding not
only the meanings and feelings the client is aware of but also simultaneously sensing
those that are just at the edge of the client’s own experience. The counselor strives to
empathically create an atmosphere in which the client is able to recognize that their
feelings (regardless of how negative or positive they feel) are acceptable and tolerable
parts of themselves. Rogers described this type of active listening as being extremely
rare in most peoples’ lives but that listening with real understanding is an extremely
potent force in client movement toward meaningful change. Expanding empathy into
current conversations in the field of counseling and psychotherapy, Mearns and Cooper
(2005) suggested that empathic attunement to client experiencing is the primary
determinant of being able to work at a relational depth necessary to bring about enduring
client change.

Rogers (1961) described unconditional positive regard as being an attitude of
prizing, liking, and caring for the client’s experience, moment to moment. He described
this type of regard as being very rare, where in society, people are often conditioned to
learn that they can only be regarded “if” they do certain things or behave in prescriptive
ways and that we are rarely valued when we live more authentically, or to be the feelings and attitudes and desires that are in us, such as confusion, fear, love, anger, courage, or shame. The therapist is able to care, nonpossessively, for the client and his or her experience of being their more immediate self from the inside versus behaving in ways that reinforce alienation of self by acting according to standards imposed externally. The client is supported in examining how to live from a more integrated stance while simultaneously living according to certain external realities. There is a total valuing and prizing of client experience rather than appreciating the client in a restrictive and conditional way. This condition leads to the creation of a unique climate for client experiencing where he or she is freed up enough to express, more completely, the full range of their feelings with regard to the problems they are facing and to risk behaving in ways that are more authentic, stepping away more trustingly from the masks and façades they use interpersonally with others and ultimately with themselves. As individuals are able to thrive in an environment that is stripped of condition-laden regarding, they are more able to give to themselves similar attitudes of prizing and acceptance of an imperfectly, flawed authentic self.

Rogers (1961) explained that congruence or genuineness on the part of the counselor was also a necessary and sufficient condition for creating a climate that leads to client change processes. The more the therapist is able to be themselves in the relationship, their feelings, thoughts, and attitudes, the greater the possibility that clients will be able to grow in constructive and personally satisfying ways. He suggested that as the counselor is able to step away from a professional exterior or façade and relate to the
client in a deeply human manner, listening more deeply to himself or herself and the goings on within, the more equipped the client can become to access the goings on within themselves and be these parts of themselves in the relationship. Rogers (1980) pointed to the importance of therapist transparency, meaning that the counselor makes himself or herself accessible to the client so that the client is able to see clearly into who the counselor is in the relationship, thus creating space for the client to feel less of a need to hold back, having awareness about the counselor’s assumptions and judgments concerning the client’s beingness in the counseling process. Ultimately, there exists congruence between who the counselor is at his or her most authentic level and how this authenticity is expressed and appropriately communicated, not obscured, in the counseling relationship.

Later in Rogers’ life (1980), he added a fourth condition to the creation of a growth-promoting environment for client change, suggesting that counselor presence is an imperative aspect of the counselor-client relationship. He described presence as the counselor’s ability to be deeply connected to his or her own self and simultaneously with the self of the other (Cooper, 2005; Friedman, 1985; Schneider, 2003). Rogers also extended his thinking about congruence into his discussion about personal presence, saying that a person’s way of being in therapy is a reflection of how that person is in his or her outside life and his or her ability to attend deeply to and illuminate the implicit as well as the explicit that is happening in the present moment of client experiencing. Additionally, presence requires the counselor to be able to sensitively attend to what is happening horizontally, or relationally, between the counselor and the client (Yalom,
1980). Rogers concluded that the greater the personal presence of the counselor in the relationship with his or her client, the more the client is helped to expand their authenticity and actualize their potential in the immediate context of therapeutic experience and generalize these results into their life outside of counseling experiences.

Through the existential contributions to the field of humanistic counseling, Bugental (1976) added that a primary goal of counseling is to aid in the repair attempts of the split and alienated self that presents in counseling by aiding the client in recovering their lost sense of being. In order to successfully accomplish this task of integration and wholeness in client experience, it is necessary to honor the subjective and to exclusively focus on the client’s inner awareness. Bugental (1999) suggested that an imperative part of the therapeutic process is to heighten, experientially, “the client’s own immediate and subjective awareness” (p. 23). As clients operate from a position of increased awareness about their own lives, moment to moment, they are able to more effectively direct themselves into satisfying and enriching practices of living.

An important orientation supporting clients in expanding their subjective awareness of self is to work primarily in the present tense, using a here-and-now approach that is consistent with all humanistic approaches, although viewed somewhat differently in purpose and expression depending upon the theoretical trajectory of the practicing counselor. The counselor listens less to what is said and more to how and when the saying occurs in an attempt to help the client in experiencing disowned ways of being and to take greater responsibility for how they are choosing to live their lives. The existential perspective views human problems as being directly related to difficulties in
being able to establish and maintain intimate relationships, both with his or her self and with another (Yalom, 1980). The therapist, from this perspective, is able to aid the client in gaining awareness about blocks to greater interpersonal intimacy by focusing heavily on the interpersonal process between client and counselor in the here-and-now environment of their relatedness (Schneider & May, 1995). This therapeutic stance presupposes that the clients’ faulty patterns of relating and being manifest in the relationship in the immediate moment of relatedness and by paying attention to this, the counselor is able to support the client in gaining awareness about interpersonal habits that are potentially unsatisfying and keep clients stuck in problematic ways of living.

The existential view concerning relatedness between counselor and client also heightens the perspective about the movement away from explicit techniques toward an increased sensitivity to the therapeutic potential of interpersonal processes between consenting persons (May, 1983). The therapeutic partnership is viewed as a journey where the therapist as facilitator invites his or her fellow traveler’s or client’s self-exploration in order to mutually break up intrapersonal blocks that prevent awareness (Yalom, 2002). Through a trusting and egalitarian relationship, the primary emphasis is placed on aiding the client in exploring themselves more experientially from an inward terrain and to assist the client in gaining insight about ways they are hindering themselves through inauthentic living.

Yalom (2002) suggested that it is necessary for the counselor to quickly obliterate the “distinction between ‘them’ (the afflicted) and ‘us’ (the healers)” (p. 8). He believed that by eliminating this perception in the relationship, the counselor is enabled to go into
the relationship with a greater capacity to possess therapeutic attitudes of mutuality, honesty, valuing, authentic presence, and trust. Yalom argued that, “Therapists must convey to the patient that their paramount task is to build a relationship together that will itself become the agent of change” (p. 34). This belief about relatedness in the therapeutic pilgrimage heightens the necessity for the therapist to be an appropriately self-disclosing partner in the therapeutic alliance and to be comfortable establishing sufficient intimacy with the client that facilitates their capacity to accept the difficult realities that are coloring their existence. The existential perspective’s contributions to the humanistic perspective supplement other humanistic thinkers by explaining that a primary focus of the therapeutic experience should be about the client’s difficulties to maintain enduring relationships with others and with oneself.

Schneider and Krug (2010) explained that a primary goal of existential-humanistic counseling is to support clients in their whole-bodied exploration process. Conceptually, the humanistic perspective concerns itself with viewing the individual, holistically (e.g., affectively, kinesthetically, cognitively, spiritually, physically, and intuitively) and from a perspective that supersedes the sum of their parts (Bugental, 1964b). The effectiveness of the therapeutic experience is dependent on how these aspects of client experience were explored and promoted in the therapy process versus how they were hindered or discouraged. Interventions that are humanistically framed are primarily interested in deepening client awareness about each of these factors within themselves and dissolving blocks that prevent wholeness and integration.
Some consistent themes that emerge in the literature (Bugental, 1967; Cooper, 2007; Farber, 2010; Gendlin, 1996; Mahrer, 1978; Maslow, 1968; Moustakas, 1956; Rogers, 1980; Rossiter, 1976; Whitton, 2003; Yalom, 1998; Yontef, 2007) regarding humanistic approaches to counseling and to relationship are: (a) concern for the development of the whole person; (b) a deep respect for the uniqueness of each person; (c) minimizing tendencies to prejudge, label, and diagnose individuals; (d) a concern about the personhood of the counselor and client and how one approaches oneself, others, and the relationship; (e) validating unique expressions of worth (particularly those that are more dormant or unseen in the client); (f) a concern about higher human qualities such as spontaneity, love, creativity, and transcendence; (g) the depth of emotional participation in the relationship, that is, appropriate transparency; (h) an emphasis on the creation of meaning; (i) helping individuals to recognize their responsibility in choosing to remake their lives; (j) the need to have one’s experience validated, addressing questions like, “How is my therapist like me?” and “How is my therapist impacted by me in an enriching way?”; (k) the importance of being accepted by a stable and reliable other; and (l) supporting clients in becoming reacquainted with something in and/or about themselves they have known all along. These characteristic elements of humanism do not comprise the whole of humanistic thought, but they lend themselves to a discussion about features that constitute a therapeutic letter written between sessions from a counselor to a client as being definitively humanistic in tone and expression. These general categories are delineated further in the form of a numbered list of possible
elements that would demarcate a therapeutic letter as being distinctively humanistic in orientation.

For the purposes of this study, I provide several specific guidelines regarding the composition of humanistically-oriented therapeutic letters. These guidelines were provided to the counselors who wrote therapeutic letters to clients during the counseling relationship. It is hoped that they offer a flexible context for which to relate to clients concerning the therapeutic experience via the medium of an in-between session letter and simultaneously give enough freedom for the therapist to relate spontaneously with the client from his or her own person and in tune with the rhythm of the shared relatedness between counselor and client, paying careful attention to client concerns and goals.

1. Attempting to communicate to the client something of your own experience of trying to temporarily live in their world and adopt their frame of reference.

2. Supporting the client to own unacknowledged parts of their suffering rather than displacing it onto others (Rank, 1958).

3. Bringing the counselor’s own creative will and individuality into the letter (Rogers, 1980).

4. A tentatively framed attempt to communicate advanced empathy to the client, or something just at the edge of the client’s experiential edge of awareness sensed by the counselor that enables the client to step into themselves more deeply. Reflecting back to the client a deeper undertone of their experience (Rogers, 1980).
5. An intentionally heightened emphasis on the emotional elements in the client’s experience in order to support the client experience a felt sense of their existence and to increase in self-understanding (Buhler, 1970; Gendlin, 1996; Rank, 1958).

6. Supporting the client in gaining experiential awareness concerning their difficulties and the creative potential within themselves, including vaguely sensed resources and strengths (Schneider & May, 1995).

7. Shifting the emphasis from the past to the present or immediacy in the counseling experience, in which all emotional experience is taking place, i.e., extending the here-and-now relationship from the counseling session into the client’s experience via the medium of letter writing (Yontef, 2007).

8. Writing to the client in a way that promotes a whole-bodied experience (kinesthetically, affectively, spiritually, physically, creatively, etc.), conceptualizing the client as superseding the sum of their parts (Bugental, 1964b; Schneider, 2010).

9. Using appropriate transparency to let the client in on how you are thinking, feeling, fantasizing about, experiencing their difficulties and being impacted through their experiences in counseling (Buber, 1970).

10. Expressing an abiding sense of trust in the client’s abilities to resolve their problems in meaningful ways in a climate of real warmth and understanding.
11. Exploring the client’s interpersonal world and generalizing client behaviors in the therapeutic relationship to relationships outside of the counseling environment (Yalom, 2002).

12. Unambiguously pointing out the client’s resiliency and attempts toward positive growth by reframing client struggles as meaningful efforts to adapt to life difficulties (Rogers, 1961).

13. Demonstrating acceptance of client attitudes and feelings and expressing warmth, caring, liking, respect, and interest in the client’s total experience in order to facilitate a fuller expression of the actualizing tendency in the client (Rogers, 1961).

14. Using language to support the client away from solving problems and toward a more deeply felt and accepting experience of becoming themselves.

15. Being honest and straightforward about the therapy experience in order to demystify the process (Yalom, 1980).

16. Intentionally pointing to the relationship between the counselor and client, honoring the mutative nature of relatedness in the counseling experience.

17. Supporting the client to recognize the responsibility and limiting contradictions that come with choosing and the opportunity to choose to remake one’s existence (Bugental, 1978; Schulenberg, 2003).

18. Pointing the client toward meaning and creativity in their experience.

19. Recognizing and communicating to the client something about their worth.
20. Speaking to the client in a way that acquaints them with something about themselves they have known all along (Yalom, 1998).

21. Writing to the client in a way that reflects mutuality and togetherness in the experience, that is, fellow travelers (Yalom, 1998).

22. Expressing appreciation for the awesome privilege of being allowed access into the most deeply meaningful places in the client’s experience (Jourard, 1971).


24. Collaborating with the client concerning their goals for the therapeutic experience (Cain, 2001).

25. Writing from the tone of one’s inner self and simultaneously from the tone of the therapeutic relationship (Moules, 2000).

26. Validating aspects of client experience that are particularly painful and challenging, including the client’s willingness to talk about and experience them in the counselor’s presence.

27. Giving attention to the way the client communicated themselves in the counseling session, nonverbally.

28. Exploring the values and beliefs held by the client and supporting them in differentiating how they choose to behave according to externally imposed values versus internally clarified values (Moustakas, 1956).

29. Communicating back to the client something of the client’s perception of their own feelings, attitudes, and ideas.
30. Regarding the uniqueness of the client in a deeply respecting way.

31. Supporting the client in truthfully addressing within themselves the question, “Am I living in a way which is deeply satisfying to me and which truly expresses me?” (Rogers, 1961).

32. Turning the client toward inner sources of information and away from the inclination to repress them and to listen to themselves more trustingly versus relying, dependently on others for answers to life difficulties (Mahrer, 1978).

33. Commenting on inner tensions the client is wrestling with, without making interpretation. An emphasis on giving back to the client what another (the counselor) is noticing in their experience.

34. Supporting the client to recognize alternatives, with sincerity and love, in order to reawaken hidden energies within them that can lead to more satisfying ways of living (Fromm, 1994).

These guidelines provide flexible scaffolding to support the counselor in maintaining a humanistic tone when writing therapeutic letters to the client during the counseling relationship. They also aid this research by providing an expansive template to maintain consistency and to ensure that the client-participants in this study each encounter a similar phenomenological experience of receiving a letter from their counselor written from a humanistic expression of relatedness while in the counseling relationship. The counselor received a copy of humanistic guidelines for writing therapeutic letters to clients in between counseling sessions and were supervised by the
researcher in this study to ensure that the letters resemble humanistic values concerning relatedness and the self-actualizing tendency in client experience.

**Summary**

This research is concerned with the phenomenological experiences of clients who receive a humanistically-oriented letter from their counselor during the counseling relationship. This chapter provided an overview of letter writing, including the historical aspects of letters and their interpersonal significance, the experiential impact of letter writing in both the writing and receiving lives of individuals who have used this medium for connection, the therapeutic use of letters in the counseling process (Burton, 1965; Ellis, 1965), and the influence of the narrative counseling orientation on therapeutic letter writing practice (White & Epston, 1990), contemporarily, in the counseling profession.

Qualitative and quantitative research was discussed to highlight the significance of letter writing practice in counseling relationships (Bell et al., 2009; Kindsvatter et al., 2009; Moules, 2000; Pyle, 2006; White & Epston, 1990). Prior research concerning the use of letters in the helping professions points to the need for in-depth, qualitative and quantitative research concerning the experiential impact of letters through the lens of the recipients (Moules, 2000; Pyle, 2006).

Letter writing provides a medium for the counselor to continue the counseling relationship beyond the limits of the counseling office environment in order to support clients in their concerns and to offer appropriate transparency about how the counselor is thinking about the difficulties the client is grappling with in their lives. Humanistic psychology offers a conceptual lens to frame the letter writing process between counselor
and client, with particular emphasis on the interpersonal dynamics impacting the client’s functioning. Shotter (1993) explained that writing a letter to a client after a counseling session is a natural extension of the counselor’s reflective attention to the client’s experience and the shared, dialogic space between the person of the counselor with the person of the client.

Humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1980) provides a theoretically-sound perspective regarding the relational stance the counselor holds, mutually, with the client and views the relationship, made definitive by the existence of necessary therapeutic conditions, as a mutative and facilitative space for optimal client growth. Letter writing from a humanistic perspective in the counseling relationship has not been explored in any discipline of inquiry. The shared consensus in the literature reviewed for this study is that an exploration of letter writing from the lived experiences of clients who receive humanistically-oriented letters from their counselors between counseling sessions is an underrepresented dimension of counseling experience. This investigation is interested in expanding the research concerning humanistic letter writing in counseling practice through a qualitative, phenomenological exploration of clients who receive a humanistically-framed letter from their counselor while simultaneously receiving counseling services.

Life seems not long enough that we can afford to go a month without a letter from a dear friend. I have nothing that I can spare,—certainly not the right to receive a letter. (Emerson, 1972, p. 470)
CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

I have attempted to bring the reader to the very heart of the phenomena being interpreted. (Paget, 1988, p. ix)

The preceding chapter reviewed the professional literature surrounding the history of epistolary practice, the use of therapeutic letter writing as a supplementary tool in the counseling relationship with clients, and also discussed both narrative and humanistic ideas concerning the characteristics of a therapeutic letter written by a counselor in the context of the counseling relationship with clients. The primary purpose of this study focuses on experiences of clients who receive a humanistically-oriented counseling letter from their therapists between counseling sessions. While there is some research, both of a quantitative and qualitative nature that points to the efficacy of letter writing in client experience (Epston, 1994; Moules, 2000), no current research specifically addresses the impact of a humanistically-informed letter written from a counselor to a client between counseling sessions. Additionally, the research conducted on letter writing in counseling is primarily quantitative in nature and focuses in large part on the perceived effectiveness of letters framed from a narrative orientation in regards to impact in both the client’s and counselor’s experience. The central research question for this study was: What are the experiences of clients relative to receiving a humanistically-oriented letter from their counselor during the counseling process? This chapter provides a description of the methodological design used in this study.
Phenomenological Research Design

From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings . . . then research is a caring act: we want to know that which is most essential to being. (van Manen, 1990, p. 5)

In order to facilitate a beginning, the phenomenologist is invited to ask, “What human experience do I feel called upon to make topical for my investigation?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 41). “Understanding begins . . . when something addresses us . . . the essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 299). Reflecting about my own experiences as a counselor who writes humanistically-oriented letters to clients between sessions as well as from the vantage of being a client who received therapeutic letters from my counselor throughout my own counseling experiences, I recognize ways in which the past has written me in addition to how I have played an active part in re-working my past.

Beginning and Ending in Wondering

Aristotle (1960) explained that knowledge achieves its genesis in wonder, and through this enlarged sense of awe, a person seeks explanation for the information that exists in experience. Both Husserl (1970a) and Aristotle (1960) concurred that experience itself must be frequently investigated in revelatory ways that culminate in the creation of meaning(s) of experiential and common truths. In order to discover these meanings, the investigation involves comprehending a series of relationships and inter-relationships that emerge in the experience itself. The understandings I am seeking to point toward with this investigation are concerned with a rigorous attempt to better
understand the universal meanings clients give to their experiences of receiving humanistically-oriented letters during the counseling process.

A qualitative, phenomenological research design was selected to represent the lived experiences of clients who have been recipients of a humanistically-informed therapeutic letter that was sent to them between counseling sessions by their counselor, with the aim of gaining a fuller understanding of what the receipt of such a letter means in a client’s life. Qualitative-phenomenological research is descriptive and inductive and concentrates primarily on the discovery of meaning from the lived perspectives of individuals, that is, research participants (Merriam, 2002). Concerning the descriptive nature of phenomenology, van Manen (1990) explained, “A phenomenological description is always one interpretation, and no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially richer or deeper description” (p. 31). Phenomenology embodies a rigorous attempt in research practice to reveal something important with respect to the interrelatedness between persons and experience and the attempt to descriptively bring to light subjective experience. In addition, phenomenology is an approach that is in line with the values and traditions of humanism, specifically a commitment to being with others and a searching interest in the inner world of individuals.

**Phenomenological Research Concerns: Humanistic Letter Writing in Counseling**

Phenomenological research is concerned with questions about everyday human experiences and experiences that are potentially significant, such as a psychological phenomenon, that can be experienced by individuals or a group of people. In order to
address these questions in some investigative and revelatory way, phenomenological research seeks to understand the essence of a phenomenon as expressed, perceptually, by those who have directly experienced it.

In this investigation, my primary concern is to research with the participants in a distinctive relationship that seeks to gain some enhanced understanding about a particular phenomenon of client experience in the counseling relationship. A phenomenological study allows a relationship that enables me to maintain humanistic values concerning relatedness, inclusive of a genuine desire to be in a nonjudging and empathic relationship made distinctive through both persons’ openness to the emergence of revelatory essences and descriptions of participant experiences of the phenomenon of humanistic letter writing in counseling.

Contemporary research concerning therapeutic letter writing practice with clients in a clinical setting has integrated both quantitative and qualitative methods to illumine the discussion concerning the utility of letter writing in supporting clients to work toward treatment goals (France et al., 1995; Palazzoli et al., 1978; Riordan, 1996). While this literature does speak to a thematic sense of the effectiveness of letter writing practice as a beneficial compliment to the establishment of a therapeutic counseling alliance and positive movement toward problem resolution in the client’s experience, some of the unique aspects of client experience can occasionally be overlooked through quantitative methodologies (Riordan, 1996). There is a singular source of primary research concerning the use of therapeutic letters from a narrative perspective in nursing practice with families (Moules, 2000), in which patient experiences are illuminated through
hermeneutic phenomenology and the use of semi-structured interviews. There is no current qualitative research, detailing client experiences in therapy of receiving a humanistically-oriented letter from their counselor.

This research investigates letter writing from a humanistic perspective by exploring the use of a counselor-written letter sent to clients between therapeutic appointments through clients’ experiential perspectives. My primary interest, as the researcher, is to gather and describe experiences obtained from clients via qualitative interviews who have had direct experience with receiving a humanistically-framed letter from their counselor between counseling appointments. It is hoped that through the use of the phenomenological method, that client experiences, constituted by meanings and descriptive essences, can expand the discussion concerning humanistic letter writing in therapeutic practice.

Phenomenological Lens

Gadamer (1975) suggested that the phenomenological method lends itself to conducting research from a humanistic perspective. Phenomenological research is reflective of humanistic values in its investigative interest in the experiential lifeworlds of individuals as they are lived and given meaning. It is a methodological approach that is concerned with the holistic nature of experience, attention to process and context, and its appreciation of the dynamic relationship between ambiguity and the human situation. Phenomenology is primarily interested with the acquisition and subsequent representation of knowledge through obtaining what is experienced by individuals in relationship to a particular phenomenon via common meanings and uniquely-held essences constitutive of
experience. This research attempted to represent the phenomenon as it was universally experienced by the participants in this study and also tried to uncover what is uniquely experienced and expressed by each participant, so as not to marginalize the individual voices that constitute this study. Polkinghorne (1988, 1989) described experience as the melding of specific happenings and consequent meanings which is the summative product of the person in relationship to his or her environment. Phenomenology provides a lens for research with human concerns, with its chief aim being centered in the unraveling of “structures, logic, and interrelationships that are obtained in the phenomenon under inspection” (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989, p. 50). By locating themes that emerge in individual accounts of experience, the essential composition can be accessed and rendered about the phenomenon as a whole.

Phenomenology gives me a lens through which to methodologically grasp, collaboratively, knowledge about the lived experiences clients have with humanistically-written therapeutic letters during the counseling process. Phenomenology acknowledges and values the radically personal nature of existence (Kierkegaard, 1974) and the belief that individual perception is paramount and equates to the creation of knowledge (Husserl, 1970a). As Luijpen (1969) suggested concerning the phenomenological approach, it allows me to address a question that has been meaningful to me through time about how do you understand the phenomenon of a client’s experience of receiving therapeutic letters in counseling. Phenomenological research also enables me to search for qualities that underlie a fundamental interest I have
concerning the values of therapeutic letter writing from a humanistic perspective and the subsequent meaning(s) clients give to this experience in the counseling process.

Nishida (1990) provided one perspective concerning the emergence of phenomenological experience, suggesting that an individual or a particular phenomenon does not create the experience but instead, the experience lends itself to the emergence of the individual or a given phenomenon. Considering Nishida’s viewpoint, phenomenology provides an interpersonal-scientific space to ask the question of the client, “What is it to be you having/in this experience?” (Solomon, 2001) in order to grasp how the phenomenon was lived, uniquely, by the individual in relationship to it. The phenomenological method also encourages me to be a consciously open participant in how I receive the unique phenomenon as it is lived and expressed by each participant in the study. The phenomenon, itself, begs for understanding in its original structure, with all of its meanings, attitudes, and ambiguities (Keen, 1975). The use of phenomenology in this research also enables me, as the researcher, to remain congruent with the interpersonal nature and humanistic attitudes involved in the context of this study, inviting me to be a highly empathic participant in the researcher-participant relationship throughout the process (Wertz, 2005).

A fundamental objective of phenomenological research is to synthesize lived experience into a textural depiction of its constitutive essences “in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful” (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). Kvale (1996) and Zahavi (2003) suggested that phenomenological research methods aim to interrogate how incidents and
experiences unfold in the lives of those who are in direct contact with the phenomenon under investigation. Each person’s experience is conceptualized as invaluable and is viewed as being unique to the individual. According to Moran (2004), this phenomenological investigation places emphasis on approximating, in some meaningful way, the real existence of things involved in peoples’ experiences of receiving a humanistically-shaped therapeutic letter during the therapy relationship; however this truth is represented through the consciousnesses of the persons involved.

This study strives to describe the experiences of participants and the subsequent meanings they attach to such experiences (Patton, 1980; Polkinghorne, 1989). Experiences are defined in the literature as being a blending of happenings and the attachment of subsequent meaning(s) which come about through the involved person’s unique relationship to his or her environment (Polkinghorne, 1989). The research strives to grasp, as accurately as possible, the phenomenon from the experiential perceptual world of the participants and the unique meanings that are attributed to such experience (Moran, 2000).

Van Manen (1990) explained, “Phenomenology . . . offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (p. 9). Heidegger (1977) stated that phenomenology is constructed from the root word, phaino, which means, “to bring to light . . . to show itself in itself . . . to place in brightness” (pp. 74-75). My primary interest in this study is to render conversations with participants (clients receiving counseling services) that “bring to light” the possibilities of humanistic letter writing in the lives of those clients who are recipients of such experience and how it
might potentially inform counselors who might choose to use it in some capacity in clinical practice. By investigating participant experiences, I am attempting to grasp less ambiguously, client experiences of receiving letters from their counselors that are written from a humanistic expression of relatedness. Conversely, phenomenology doesn’t seek to provide an articulated theory about the truthfulness of phenomenon but instead, it begins in wondering and ends in wondering with the hope of a deepened sense of the latter.

Anzaldua (1999) introduced the idea of “la facultad” to describe the ability to see in surface phenomenon the possibilities of deeper, more contextual realities and to simultaneously grasp the deep structure below the surface. Phenomenological research is primarily interested in uncovering the part(s) of experience “that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is behind which feelings reside/hide” (Anzaldua, 1999, p. 60). How does the phenomenon, as experienced by each participant, break into their everyday mode of perception and cause a slight shift in their experiencing of the world? Phenomenology seeks access to this shift through the use of intentional interviews aimed at uncovering, as descriptively as possible, the internal composition of each participant’s unique relationship to the phenomenological experience.

According to Gadamer (1975), “We cannot have experiences without asking questions” (p. 362). Phenomenologically, questions are invitations into a dialogic relationship between researcher and participant and support the participant in revealing their experiences with relationship to the phenomenon in detail. In addition, a central,
guiding question or concern must be decided upon by the researcher in order to investigate a particular phenomenal experience. According to McLeod (1994), the primary question that phenomenological research attempts to address is the relationship between a person and a phenomenal experience and the meanings that are created afresh in the person as they relate to a particular phenomenon. The question that addresses me, phenomenologically, in the context of this study is primarily centered around, “What are clients’ experiences with receiving a humanistically-oriented letter from their counselor in-between counseling sessions, and how and what might I, and potential interested others, learn regarding this particular interaction?” In phenomenological research, there is a shared speech that emerges through the caring exchange of questions, dialogue, and sensitive listening between researcher and participant that helps develop meaning(s) (Friedeberg, 2002).

**Phenomenology of Consciousness**

Van Manen (1990) equated phenomenology with the concept of consciousness, stating, “Consciousness is the only access human beings have to the world. Or rather, it is by virtue of being conscious that we are already related to the world” (p. 9). In the Cartesian Meditations, Husserl (1970b) described consciousness as a stream of experience, having its own historical landscape, created in pre-predicative instants or encounters in the world. Consciousness suggests that in the freshness and propinquity of encounter, essences concerning external reality reside and immanent objects reside, waiting to be transformed into knowledge. Consciousness points to a direction and carries with it complimentary meanings, or what phenomenology defines as intentionality
Phenomenologists describe consciousness as being intentionally tuned to the world, or always being conscious of something in our relational environment. A person sees a particular object, feels an emotion toward a specific person or context, or holds ideas contemplatively in the mind. Consciousness enables us to be connected with the world in which we live. Husserl (1970a) suggested that with respect to intentionality, phenomenology seeks a descriptive understanding of consciousness by thoroughly examining how people are engaged with others and situations that constitute their world. Instead of focusing purely on what takes place in the mind, phenomenology suggests that two aspects of experience be central to the investigation: what is experienced and how it is experienced. Phenomenological research is interested in bringing out, as descriptively as possible, both aspects of an individual’s consciousness with relation to a particular phenomenon.

For example, I perceive my daughter running away from me toward the swing set in our backyard. My intentional experience is the blending of the external appearance of my daughter running toward the swings and simultaneously, the image of my daughter running away that is maintained in my awareness rooted on memory, previous associations, and meanings. Phenomenological research would extend an invitation for me to strive to additionally experience my daughter’s experience of running toward the swings and to ask intentional questions aimed at grasping this reality as it was uniquely lived by her. Moustakas (1994) suggested that meanings retrieved through memory can be confirmed through immediate happenings of what is being revealed through experiences such as my daughter running toward the swings. Speculation about potential
meanings cannot be authenticated and yet these potential meanings remain in the realm of possibility relative to my experience of my daughter running toward the swings. Every experience houses windows toward possibilities for additional experience and meaning(s).

As a consequence, there is no complete or definitive truth in experience (Moustakas, 1994). Every intentional experience insinuates something and indicates something (Moustakas, 1994). Hence, as Husserl (1970a) postulated, every thing in experience must be questioned, must be experienced, seen, touched so as to understand the underlying themes that constitute its structure and through the grasping of the thematic structure of things, the composite essences and invariant meanings can be absorbed and rendered, descriptively.

It is through consciousness that we become partially aware of our existence in and with the world and as a consequence, the world’s relationship to and with us. As aware participants in the world, there is some implied suggestion of the reality that we are constantly interpreting our interface with the environment. Husserl (1970b) contended that people have a certain confidence about how a phenomenon is subjectively experienced and that through exploring a person’s lived-world, or one’s continuous experience as a human being with a particular phenomenon and how these experiences are represented (Biley & Galvin, 2007), a person can approximate the truth of what constitutes the internal consciousness of another. The phenomenological method focuses on the descriptive accounts of lived experience, concentrating on the subjective qualities of social life that is internal to the individual’s consciousness. Phenomenology provides
the necessary tools for the researcher to be able to successfully accomplish this task in an objectively rigorous and valid way. These tools are discussed in a later portion of this chapter.

The phenomenon becomes increasingly illuminated and deepened in meaning as it is considered and reconsidered in a reflective way (Moustakas, 1994), looked at again and again and again in a deliberately repeated way. Husserl (1975) explained that a thing is composed of veracity in consciousness but that

This reality is reality for me only as long as I believe I can confirm it . . . I must be able to provide useable procedures and other evidences which lead me to the [thing] itself and through which I realize the [thing] as being truly there. (p. 23)

In order to gain some knowledge of the thing itself, one must acquire an understanding of the essences that constitute the thing in experience. Essences are fluid and changing, and knowledge is our consciousness of the essences that constitute experience. Phenomenology seeks to capture essences of individual’s experiences with relationship to a particular phenomenon in an attempt to represent these experiences as descriptively as possible. The essences in and of experience are the invariant meanings that constitute the phenomenon as experienced by each participant (Moustakas, 1994).

**Perception**

The fundamental foundation of knowledge is perception, which is the only source that cannot be mistrusted (Moustakas, 1994). According to I. Miller (1984), perceiving straightforwardly demands that the perceiver focuses on the object of experience itself. This is consistent with Polkinghorne’s (1989) assertion regarding the primary focus of
phenomenology, explaining that phenomenology seeks to describe experience or the reality people experience and the perceptual meanings they assign to such experience. In Chamberlain’s (1974) essay on phenomenological methodology, he suggested that meaning is not contained in experience but instead is grasped reflectively and is concerned with our perceptions of experience. The meaning(s) are found in the attitudes of the individual toward the object or experience of consciousness that have already passed by and are retrieved reflectively. This way of knowing demands that the researcher be in a special kind of relationship with participants, where they seek, empathically, to experience the subjective reality of participants’ lived experiences with relationship to the phenomenon of interest.

Phenomenology suggests that every new perception that emerges always contains the potentialities of additive understanding regarding any thing. Husserl (1970a) continued by suggesting that the perceptions that manifest through an exhaustive investigation of experience are defined as horizons. When perceptions are horizontalized through phenomenological research, every perception is valued equally due to the fact that each perception contributes something substantial to the experience as a whole. Every perception is a single point against a canopy of extending perceptions that open up other perspectives and possibilities for understanding the phenomenon of interest. Phenomenological research seeks permission from participants who are in a special kind of proximity to the phenomenon of inquiry to borrow their experiences and their perceptive description of a particular phenomenon in an attempt to better grasp the deeper meanings of a particular aspect of their experience and ultimately, provide a snapshot of
some common aspect of human experiencing within relationship to the investigated phenomenon.

**Phenomenological Scaffolding in This Study: An Introduction**

The guiding theme in phenomenology is an intentional and deliberate attempt by the researcher to go “back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1970b, p. 252). Moustakas (1994) added to Husserl’s claim, suggesting that phenomenology focuses on the manifestation of things and a committed pilgrimage to things and experiences just as they are rendered. The phenomenological researcher is concerned primarily with wholeness and with examining things from many sides, angles, and perspectives in an attempt to capture meanings from appearances and arriving at essences through a reflective stance on conscious expressions of experience. The researcher strives to remain faithful to the most accurate description of experiences, choosing to refrain from explanations due to the fact that descriptions preserve the initial composition of things whereas explaining distorts and diminishes. The researcher’s primary task to go “back to the things themselves” is grounded in the use of artful and purposeful questions that give a direction and focus to the meanings derived through dialogue and interaction.

The phenomenological focus of this study is to describe what the research participants, or co-researchers, share in some universal way with regard to the phenomenon of clients’ experiences of receiving a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter written by their counselor during the counseling process. To approximate the essences and meanings involved within participant experience(s) that support this research investigation in grasping the “very nature of the thing” (van Manen, 1990, p.
of the phenomenon of interest, the phenomenological investigation employed in this study is a synthesis of phenomenological methods described by Creswell (1998); Giorgi (2009); Moustakas (1994); Pollio, Thompson, and Henley (1997); van Kaam (1959); and Van Manen (1990). These steps, generally listed here, begin with the self of the researcher (Pollio et al., 1997) and turn to a phenomenon that fundamentally intrigues and pulls our awareness to a specific aspect of human experience and investigating the experiences associated with this phenomenon as they are lived by individuals in a special relationship to the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; van Manen, 1990).

The researcher attempts to grasp the fundamental and underlying concepts of phenomenological research in order to approach the investigation with a psychological attitude that is conducive for engaging with participants in the research experience (Giorgi, 2009). The researcher then engages in the process of epoché, suspending the natural attitude toward the world and things and works toward a heightened sense of awareness concerning one’s biases and assumptions pertaining to the phenomenon of interest, and strives to set aside these beliefs and attitudes via reflective practice throughout the research process (Moustakas, 1994). Individuals who are in a unique relationship to the phenomenon of interest are purposefully located and invited to consent as participants in the phenomenological study (Creswell, 1998). The researcher and/or research team then conducts dialogic interviews with these individuals, or co-researchers in the phenomenological investigation (Kvale, 1996), in an attempt to gather data about their lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon rather than conceptualizations about experience (van Manen, 1990).
The data collection or interviewing aspect of the phenomenological method utilizes relationally-informed and intentional dialogue with participants guided by central questions concerned with participant experiences of humanistic letter writing and the contexts that influenced or impacted participant experiences of the phenomenon. Throughout the dialogic relationship with the participant, the researcher focuses directly with the lived inner experience of the participant in order to grasp, experientially, rich descriptions of the participant’s unique relationship to the phenomenon of receiving a humanistic counseling letter from their therapist (Kensit, 2000). Next, the researcher and research team strives to maintain an enduring and oriented relationship to the phenomenon of interest throughout the study (van Manen, 1990) and employs the van Kaam (1959) method of analysis of phenomenological data in conjunction with Giorgi (1975a, 1976, 2009), Hycner (1999), Moustakas (1994), Pollio et al. (1997), and Spinelli (1989).

**Beginning With the Self of the Researcher**

The researcher’s identity, or the sense one has concerning who they are, is a vital factor in what can be found in a process of critical inquiry of human phenomenon (du Plock, 2004, 2008). Being able to comprehend where one (the researcher) is upon entering their research trajectory, or the way in which the researcher approaches an investigative process of human concern, is a primary, initial task in order to be aware of how his or her subjectivity can potentially obscure aspects of the phenomenon (May et al., 1958) being investigated in the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that in qualitative research, the researcher’s position of reflexivity, or their critically reflective
relationship with the self of the researcher is invariably essential to the nature of meaningful findings in any study due to the fact that the researcher is the primary methodological instrument for collecting and interpreting the data that constitutes the research process. Researcher transparency with the reader clarifies the researcher’s assumptions, motivations, and strategies involved in the interpretation of the data. Researcher reflexivity then is an important and continuous step the researcher takes toward establishing a trustworthy relationship with the participants of the study, the phenomenological data and corresponding analysis, and the subsequent relationship with an interested audience of readers.

The phenomenological research method highlights the lived experiences of all participants involved in the research process, including the research participants as well as the researcher(s). The lived experiences of participants are explored with relationship to the phenomenon being studied—in this case, client experiences of receiving a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter from their counselor during the counseling process. In the context of the phenomenological researcher(s), their lived experience consists of the application of the phenomenological method itself since the researcher is conceptualized as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. In order to conduct sound phenomenological research, the researcher needs to rigorously embody the methodological process by engaging in self-reflective practices throughout the study in order to maintain a sensitive relationship to participants and to the phenomenon and to continuously increase in self-awareness concerning the unfolding nature of the investigation.
In the context of this study, the counselors who wrote the humanistically-oriented letters to the clients were additionally important to this study. The letters he or she authored and sent to clients between counseling sessions was the treatment that was being investigated in this study. The counselors and I, as researcher, worked together in order to ensure that the letters corresponded to the humanistic criteria for a therapeutic letter. I asked that each counselor attend to the template for writing a humanistic letter (see Chapter 1) and thoughtfully select three features to attend to in their letter that was consistent with what was most appropriate for the client’s concerns at the time the letter was composed. This was also done to ensure consistency with respect to the letters meeting the determined criteria to qualify as humanistic in nature. Both counselors participated in self-reflective practice during this study concerning their letter-writing process.

In this section, I discuss my positioning in this study and my motivations and intentions for undertaking this research concerning humanistic letter writing in counseling through the experiential perspectives of clients. In order to transition from an unclarified subjective stance that increases the likelihood of obscured data toward a stance of objectivity, made distinctive through increased self-awareness, I make use of reflective questions, “What does it mean, to me, to experience a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter in counseling?” and “How might the reception of such a letter in-between counseling sessions impact the way I feel about myself and about the work I am doing in counseling with my therapist?” These questions aid me in facilitating an awareness about my own subjective arrangement at the heart of this study. I strive for
transparency during this research process with myself, the co-researchers, and with the reader concerning some of my assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs concerning this phenomenon.

Gadamer (1975) wrote, “In order to be able to ask, one must want to know, and that means knowing that one does not know” (p. 363). Spinelli (1989) suggested that phenomenology reinforces this idea in research practice by demanding that the researcher vigorously works to unknow what he or she thinks they know about the phenomenon. I approached this research process, simultaneously juggling my own reality of letter writing from a humanistic perspective and also holding the possibilities in participant stories concerning their revelatory relationships with the phenomenon of interest. I increased my awareness about my own experiences as a practitioner and client concerning humanistic letter writing in counseling through the epoché process. This reflective exercise aided me in finding my stance in this investigation as a researcher, independent of my views and attitudes as someone who does have a relationship with the phenomenon, outside of this study. I recognize the complexity involved with unknowing what I know, experientially and intellectually regarding this particular phenomenon.

**Researcher Experiences With Letter Writing**

Through memory, I retrieved my own personal and professional experiences with therapeutic letter writing over the past several years, all of which were positive and growing. I speak, descriptively, to what to me is meant by growth. Through this bracketing journey with myself, three particular experiences come to my mind most readily. Additionally, I also recognize that my experiences with sending and receiving
therapeutic letters in counseling are quite limited. I began writing therapeutic letters from the narrative perspective during my master’s training while working with couples almost four years ago. Since that time, I have evolved into writing letters to clients that are framed, theoretically, by humanistic psychology. I have consistently used therapeutic letters with clients that I feel might receive some benefit from receiving this supplement to the counseling relationship. I recognize that due to my limited experiences with letter writing in the counseling context, I hold views that are quite biased and lacking in necessary information regarding the phenomenon. I recognize that this is an area that I strived to guard against during my experiences as a researcher in this study through the use of a peer, research team, and reflective journaling.

While working at a college counseling center, I wrote humanistically-oriented letters to a young female client between sessions. What I remember most about her was the difficulty she felt in honoring internal feelings of self in a world that placed a great deal of external demands concerning achievement and personal worth onto her leading to a suppressed and emotionally painful existence. She described receiving these letters in between our counseling appointments as the most rewarding part of the counseling journey because it enabled her to see and experience her changes, again and again, between sessions, helping her to feel more encouraged in her personal journey outside of the counseling room and enabling her to choose greater risks that led to personal fulfillment and what she perceived as more authentic self-expansion.

The second experience was my own experiences with receiving letters as a client during my counseling relationship with my therapist. I remember that the letters my
therapist sent to me were his first experiences with writing to clients and while they were typically short, I felt valued and supported by my counselor, which led to increased feelings of trust and a willingness to risk greater vulnerability and disclose myself more completely in sessions when we were together, culminating in important areas of growth in my own personal life as well as in my counselor personhood.

The final experience has to do with the nature of therapeutic letter writing in counseling practice and some misconceptions that exist surrounding this therapeutic modality in professional and academic contexts. While presenting at a professional counseling conference in the fall of 2009, I provided a literature review and a case example of humanistic letter writing in the counseling relationship, and what stands out most vividly was the mixture of reactions, ranging from surprise that counselors were writing letters to their clients between sessions and excitement about the therapeutic possibilities that surrounded this way of being in a special kind of relationship with clients. Later, I remember my experiences of being told not to write letters to clients during the counseling process at a community agency I worked at for several months due to the concern about the potential for letters to foster an unhealthy dependency in the counseling relationship. While I continue to be met with the polarities of academic and professional perception regarding the utility of humanistic letter writing in the counseling relationship, those perceptions ranging from being positive and supportive to mildly negative and rejecting, I have experienced, first hand, the impact of a therapeutic letter written to a client after a counseling session that was either particularly challenging and
exhausting or just to welcome a new client to a different kind of experience of being in relationship with someone.

**Setting Aside Researcher Bias in Order to Hold it in Consciousness**

I recognize that it is difficult to detach myself completely from my presuppositions related to the context of this study, and phenomenology does not posit that I have to pretend otherwise (Hammersley, 2000). Phenomenology asks that I be accountable of biases that I, as the researcher, bring to a particular study and simultaneously be aware of the impact my attitudes might have on the credibility of the study (Maxwell, 2005). Phenomenology provides a distinct methodological lens, inclusive of tools that support me in researching this phenomenon, transcendentally, by distilling the experiences of persons in relationship to the phenomenon of humanistic letter writing and rendering the descriptions of their experiences as vividly as possible with my own experiences of humanistic letter writing bracketed and set aside so that a fresh and uncontaminated perspective about the phenomenon can be simultaneously discovered and portrayed for an audience of interested others (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas posited that the aim of any potent phenomenological research is to render that which is perceived freshly, as if being experienced for the first time. The phenomenological tool, or process of epoché, enables me to approximate this type of unfettered description of client experiences with the phenomenon of humanistic letter writing in the counseling relationship.

When practicing epoché, or intentional effort to refrain from judgment about things, and to abstain from the everyday and natural way of perceiving things,
judgmentally, a phenomenon can appear cleanly through a process of intuition and reflection and can potentially be found in its constitutive essence and potential meanings (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché invited the researcher to control for his or her biases, attitudes, beliefs, presuppositions, and experiences with the phenomenon of interest. Epoché enables me to bracket my convictions so that I can receive experience in its most primal state, as it gives itself to consciousness. Epoché helped me to increase my awareness about the biases I hold concerning experience, thus sharpening the field of consciousness so that I can see, feel, hear, and imagine the essences within another’s experience. In the case of this research, being faithful to the phenomenological process of epoché enables me to honor participant experiences, as vividly and richly as possible, seeing them wholly with unfettered eyes.

Although Heidegger (1962) and Solomon (2001) argued that one cannot bracket or set aside experience entirely and that the epoché can never actually be approximated, Husserl (1970b) and Moustakas (1994) disagreed, contending that the experience of epoché can be experienced through a rigorous effort on the part of the researcher and/or research team. They suggested that the philosophical orientation of the researcher engaged in phenomenological research is oriented around an intentional and dedicated effort to strive toward the experience of epoché by being aware of our consciousness of something and faithfully trying to understand it in order to set it aside and to strive toward the lived experiences of participants, uninfluenced by researcher bias.

Through the phenomenological process of epoché, the researcher diligently worked to set aside anything that intimates a prejudgment of experience in order to reach
a transcendental state of openness and receptiveness and a willingness to experience otherness in a radically open way, untainted by the personally held beliefs and prejudices that are typically tightly and unreflectively held in everyday experience (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas further suggested that as the researcher is able to successfully set aside their views concerning the phenomenon of interest and focus solely on those views and descriptions expressed by the participants, he or she is actively employing the first and perhaps most valuable step of the phenomenological research method. Moustakas explained that as phenomenological researchers conduct their studies, “no position whatsoever is taken . . . nothing is determined in advance;” and the researchers strives continuously to, “return to whatever is there in . . . memory, perception, judgment, feeling, whatever is actually there” (p. 84). The researcher set aside prior knowledge which had a deleterious influence on participant expressions and strove to achieve the point of epoché with participants throughout the investigation, enabling me to see the ordinary as strange and in need of description (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Through epoché, my primary interest as the researcher was to develop and maintain the capacity to look before judging and for cultivating a space within myself so that I can actually see and hear what is before me and simultaneously, in me.

In addition to the counselor involved in this study, I am also a research instrument in regards to the investigative and interpretive aspects of the research process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I recognized the invaluable role I (as researcher) hold in establishing, faithfully, the experiences of my co-researchers in this phenomenological investigation of humanistic letter writing. The interviews constituting this study were conducted by me,
the primary researcher. The data analysis of these transcribed interviews were interpreted by me with the support of a research group that aided me in being aware of my biases and prejudices in this study and ensured descriptive accuracy (Pollio et al., 1997).

**Researcher Demographics**

I am a 31-year-old Caucasian male and a doctoral candidate in counselor education and supervision at Kent State University located in Kent, Ohio. I have been a licensed professional counselor in the state of Idaho and, currently, I am licensed professionally in the state of Ohio. I provide counseling services at a community mental health agency in Portage County, Ohio, and additionally work in a private practice setting in Summit County, Ohio. In addition, I supervise master’s level counseling students in their practicum experiences and teach as an adjunct instructor at a CACREP accredited master’s counseling program in both school and community counseling programs.

**Researcher Assumptions Concerning Letter Writing in Counseling**

I recognized that my perceptions, historic and contemporary relationship to the phenomenon of interest, and my values were often present during this investigation. However, through the phenomenological step of reduction, I vigorously employed the epoché process so that I could minimize the potential impact my attitudes had on the findings in this study. Below, I describe some of the assumptions that I hold concerning the phenomenon of humanistic letter writing in the attempt to bracket them for the purpose of this study:

1. There is a universal and fundamental experience regarding the experiential meaning(s) clients give to their experiences of receiving in-between session
therapeutic letters from their counselor during the counseling process. It is additionally assumed that there will be aspects of receiving between session therapeutic letters that will be unique to clients.

2. Therapeutic letter writing, when used appropriately and with ethical soundness, supports clients in achieving therapeutic goals.

3. Therapeutic letter writing strengthens the counseling relationship between client and counselor.

4. Counselors who write to their clients between sessions from a humanistic perspective will feel a greater connection and will express these feelings of relatedness more genuinely in session.

5. Counselors who write to their clients between sessions evidence caring and support and model therapeutically permeable boundaries for clients.

6. Clients are appreciative of letters that they receive from their counselor during the counseling process.

7. Some additional positive impacts of therapeutic letters sent to clients between sessions as experienced in the client’s experiential frame of reference: increased trust in the counselor and in the counseling relationship, increased tolerance for uncertainty and complexities of the counseling relationship and for problems of living, experiential feelings of being cared for and valued, feeling important to their counselor and as though more of the therapist is available to them in their own personal life, the therapeutic relationship feels more generalizable to relationships outside of the counseling room, feeling
encouraged to continue looking inwardly and to continue working in
counseling, an increased willingness to be vulnerable and disclosing in the
counseling relationship through a letter-influenced engendering of
interpersonal safety, normalizing of client feelings, a feeling of specialness, an
additional layer of support to aid clients in managing setbacks and particularly
exhaustive and challenging catharsis, and mirror-like, the holding up of client
strengths, buoying the client toward a more accurate image of self, including
an experiential sense of personal resources and potentialities.
8. Counseling can be a confusing and frightening experience. An appropriately
timed letter sent to a client can be a welcoming and encouraging experience.
9. A therapeutic letter provides clients with a snapshot of who they are in a
moment of therapeutic experience and encourages reflective process in the
client’s life.
10. Letters sent to clients in between sessions reinforce work being done in the
counseling session and support clients in continuing to take growthful risks
outside of the session.
11. Therapeutic letters orient clients toward intimacy and relationship and in
deepening clients’ experiences of feeling heard and understood.
12. Therapeutic letters sent to clients in-between sessions are often viewed as a
gift, something that is special and carries a unique dimension of worth and
value in client experience.
13. Therapeutic letters sent to clients can help to lessen misunderstandings in the counseling experience.

14. Therapeutic letter writing provides a way for the practitioner to conceptualize the client more experientially and humanely, relating to the client, person to person versus the impersonal and traditional method of writing about clients through the medium of a case note.

15. Clients appreciate therapist reflections about the experience, including therapist disclosures about the therapeutic process and the influence of the client’s experiences on the counselor.

16. Clients appreciate feeling valued by their therapist and thought about outside of the counseling session. Letters contribute to this type of experience.

17. Therapeutic letters increase the likelihood of early self-disclosures from the client in the counseling process.

18. Therapeutic letters instill hopefulness in clients during the counseling process.

19. The therapeutic letter is an extension or bi-product of interpersonal engagement at a level of relational depth (Mearns & Cooper, 2005) and caring.

20. Therapeutic letters enlarge and sharpen the therapeutic hour, making it more potent in the client’s experience outside of therapy.

Throughout the research process, I strove to bracket these assumptions, along with other potentially emerging experiences and attitudes, in relationship to what was revealed by the participants, specifically, those related to the existence of the genesis of
those revelations. Explaining epoché, Merlau-Ponty (1962) said, “[Bracketing] slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice” (p. xiii). Suspending my judgments about the phenomenon invited me to be aware of how my experiences with humanistic letter writing practice influence my positioning in this study, enabling me to “escape the danger of finding only what one expects to see” (Giorgi, 1976, p. 313) by cultivating an open-ended and unfixed presence to the phenomenon as it is unfolding. Bracketing increased the potential of the trustworthiness of the descriptions that were expressed by the participants in this study.

**Epoché Strategies From the Literature**

Four methods that I employed in this study to support the suspension of researcher bias are: (a) reflective journaling (Ortlipp, 2008), (b) use of an external auditor and research group (Creswell, 1998; Pollio et al., 1997), (c) peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and (d) member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through employing these methods, I am actively controlling for my subjective biases that could potentially impact the credibility of the study in a deleterious manner (Newman & Benz, 1998).

**Reflective journaling.** Learning journals (Neill, 1999) were initially designed for use in participant experiences of sensitivity training or laboratory learning in order to explore various dimensions of human activity. Journal keeping lends itself to reflective practice, an invaluable philosophical component of phenomenological practice. Learning journals are like any type of effective journaling practice, in that they are designed to support individuals in increasing self-awareness and maintaining a personal feedback system. Some of the mechanics that constitute a learning journal are an attuned focus to
the experiences, or to what actually happened, personal reactions to the experience, inclusive of feelings, striking thoughts, fantasies and/or dreams, and what was learned from what happened. This reflective activity supported me in maintaining a sensitive awareness to my relationship to the phenomenon of interest and to participant renderings of experience. Ortlipp (2008) suggested that maintaining a journal throughout the qualitative research process aids the researcher in engendering reflexivity, enabling the researcher to use his or her journal keeping as a means of investigating personal assumptions and intentions and as a way to elucidate individual systems of meaning and belief(s). Ortlipp additionally explained that maintaining a journal lends itself to greater researcher transparency during the research process, facilitating the expression of researcher thinking, values, and experiences to both the self of the researcher and to the selves of readers.

Ortlipp (2008) discussed research by Glesne and Peshkin (1992) and Patton (1980) that pointed to the importance of the researcher’s attention to concerns such as reliability, validity, and objectivity concerning the analysis of and rendering of research findings. She also pointed to Denzin’s (1994) postulation concerning the crisis of interpretation in qualitative research, which adheres to the debate concerning research bias and its unresolvable dilemma regarding how much and what types of researcher influence are acceptable to any given study. Reflective journaling enabled me to honor and be sensitive to concerns about reliability and objectivity in that I am not eliminating my biases concerning humanistic letter writing but instead, I am rendering them in a highly visible way so that the reader, along with myself, is made aware of those
influences that could potentially impinge upon the study without the intentional use of phenomenological strategies such as reflective practice through the use of a learning journal.

As I have expressed above, I have attempted on some comprehensive level to unveil the “baggage” (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 698) I bring to this particular study, which enabled me to become more aware of those beliefs that were operating in me, perfunctorily. Reflective journaling also enabled me to approach participatory consciousness while conducting the research for this study (Heshusius, 1994) due to increased personal awareness concerning myself and how I entered into the questions giving direction to this study. Reflective journaling also aided me in staying close to my subjectivity, which Peshkin (1988) reported is a necessary part of conducting phenomenological research. This process assisted me in remaining continuously aware of historical and emerging presuppositions throughout the experience, thus helping me to stay in a close relationship with the phenomenon and those essences rendered in the descriptions of participants. Keeping a learning journal also supported me in dealing with structural questions involved in the research process, such as those posed by Glesne and Peshkin (1992) concerning the amount of the researcher’s self that can be available without influencing, negatively, the interview process. Reflecting on both the information revealed in the interview as well as on the interview process itself supported me in achieving participant descriptions that emerged freshly.

**External auditor.** Creswell (1998) explained that an external auditor and/or member of a research group supports the researcher in maintaining awareness of personal
biases, including those that are not potentially appearing in the researcher’s consciousness. The research group for this study was composed of a doctoral student who had no involvement in the study itself but has an interest in phenomenological research methods, therapeutic letter writing, and who also values a humanistic orientation to counseling; two primary advisors that had expertise and experience in qualitative research within counselor education; and an outside member who specialized with the application of qualitative methodological designs within the context of human sciences. The doctoral student involved in the research group asked me the central question guiding this study, “What are your experiences with humanistic letter writing in counseling?” This enabled me to become more aware of my biases concerning humanistic letter writing in counseling as well as to increase my empathy for participants’ experiences of being interviewed about their relationship to the phenomenon of letter writing in counseling. The other members of the research group continued to support me in establishing the trustworthiness of the analysis and the interpretation of the descriptions of the co-researchers in this study and in ensuring the appropriate implementation of the phenomenological design within the constraints of this research.

**Peer debriefing.** Peer debriefing is a collaborative, dialogic space between the researcher and a peer or colleague with the intent of the meeting oriented around the analysis of participant descriptions regarding the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The peer debriefing enabled the researcher to dialogue about his reactions to participant descriptions, to dialogue about the descriptions, and to discuss the themes discovered in the analysis. The aim of this strategy was to support the researcher in establishing the
credibility of the study through the addition of an outside perspective, or a set of fresh eyes, concerning what has been distilled by the researcher from participant statements. I employed a colleague and professional counselor to support me with the peer-debriefing process. This peer is familiar with the practice of letter writing in counseling and is also knowledgeable about qualitative methodologies in research practice. She was brought in at the end of the interviews and interpretative phase of the research process to dialogue about the researcher’s experience of working with participants, describing their phenomenological experiences, and to discuss any residual challenges as well as to clarify the representations made by the researcher and research team concerning participant experiences.

**Member checking.** Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) honors Kvale’s (1996) description of the collaborative relationship between researcher(s) and participant(s), in that participants are co-researchers in the experience of investigating the phenomenon of interest, and their voices ultimately speak to some universal experience with regard to the phenomenon. The researcher returned to the participants involved in the study and inquired about the accuracy of what was found by asking the question, “Does this fit your experience as you know it?” This strategy highlighted the collaborative orientation that I held as a researcher in this study and the paramount importance of participant voices in determining the composite statements regarding the essence of their experiences with humanistic letter writing in the counseling process.

The next section addresses the psychological attitudes and the philosophical stance of the phenomenological researcher.
Researcher Orientation

Objectivity is not a characteristic that people have as a possession. It is a characteristic acquired, often in a long and difficult struggle. In phenomenological work, objectivity does not mean that one apprehends a phenomenon objectively as “out there.” On the contrary, it means that one apprehends it subjectively; one acquires an understanding from the inside. It means that one has grasped, or at least aimed to grasp, the essential nature of the experience with which one is concerned . . . Phenomenology does not assume that there is a phenomenon apart from a perception of the phenomenon, and since the phenomenon under study is in the human world . . . phenomenology means relinquishing many preconceptions about the nature of the world of everyday life about which the phenomenologist, too, has ideas. “Objectivity” is a portrait from within the portrayed. It is expressive of the integrity of subjective experience. What makes phenomenology “objective” is that it comes to stand apart from the world that everybody knows and describes the world as it has not yet become known. It is difficult to do phenomenological work. A phenomenology study requires a complex use of the self, the phenomenologist’s self, the self as a subject attempting to understand other subjects. (Paget, 1988, pp. 152-153)

I began this research with the phenomenological assumption that clients’ experiences of receiving a humanistic letter from their counselor during their counseling experiences, like any phenomenal experience, is not completely knowable in any sense. Phenomenologically, experience is a composite whole that can be reduced into a series of representations, descriptions, and essences that can be approximated in a tentative and conversational way, but cannot necessarily be determined definitively. Phenomenological research is interested with accessing, via a generalized snapshot of a few individuals’ experiences with the phenomenon of interest, some revelatory understanding concerning the complexity and contradictions inherent in human experience.
I was interested in thoughtfully and quasi-scientifically, considering the layers of subjective experiences of persons in a specific kind of counseling relationship, where humanistic letters are composed by the counselor and then mailed to clients between counseling sessions. The perceptual meanings these individuals gave to their experiences with this phenomenon were valued. Doing phenomenological research was an invitation for me to recognize the challenges of describing and interpreting without objectifying or talking for others. I welcomed this challenge with some trepidations concerning the nature of an exploration involving the subjective experiences of others and my own situatedness in this study and sought to render, as seamlessly and honestly as possible, the phenomenological experiences expressed by the participants in this study. My ultimate goal as a qualitative researcher in this project was to deepen the reader’s sense of wonder concerning this phenomenon within the therapeutic relationship between counselor and client and to perhaps add to the possibilities concerning humanistic letter writing in counseling practice.

**Phenomenological Attitude**

Giorgi (2009) posited that a primary step in conducting phenomenological research is to assume the phenomenological attitude in order to regard everything from the perspective of consciousness, that is, to view all objects from the perspective of how they are lived and encountered regardless of whether or not they actually are the way they are being experienced. This stance enabled the researcher in this investigation to experience objects in participant experiences as presences to be explored in order to discover the essences and to determine what was essential about them. After the
researcher bracketed historical knowledge concerning the phenomenon being investigated, critical attention was accessed regarding present experiences.

As the phenomenological researcher confronts phenomenological descriptions, Giorgi (1976, 2009) listed several important features that need to be present during this process: (a) empathic immersion into the world of participant description, where the researcher strives to position himself or herself in the experiential world of the participant and grasp as deeply as possible the experience as the participant perceives it; (b) slowing down and dwelling, where the researcher deliberately pauses and makes room for each description in order to interrogate the situation in all of its shapes and forms; (c) continuation of suspended beliefs and heightened interest, where the researcher views the situation more objectively with an attitude of wonderment concerning where he or she is at in relation to the phenomenon as it is being described by the participant and gradually intensifying one’s interest in the subtleties and nuances of the descriptions rendered by each participant; and (d) turning from objects to possibilities and meanings, where there is less of a concern about a reality and more of an interest in what is actually meant by each participant.

Giorgi (1970) explained that the phenomenological researcher utilizes numerous activities in order to nurture the above described attitudes during the research process. The thematic essence of these activities is aimed at supporting the researcher in developing and nurturing a reflective relationship with participants’ expressions of their experiences with the phenomenon of interest. In addition to reflective practice, bracketing biases through the epoché process and the suspension of the natural attitude
toward the phenomenon embodies an essential step toward the emergence of the phenomenological attitude within the self of the researcher.

**Participant Selection**

**Purposeful Sampling**

I employed a purposeful sample of participants that have a revelatory relationship with the phenomenon of interest (Wertz, 2005). In the context of this study, a derivative of purposeful sampling known as criterion sampling was used, which enabled me to select participants, intentionally, in order to gather information-rich data about participant experiences of humanistic letter writing in counseling (Patton, 1980). Creswell (1998) suggested that criterion sampling stipulates that participants are selected on account of their relationship to the phenomenon of interest and guarantees the quality assurance of the study. It was determined by the researcher that participants needed to be involved in a current counseling relationship with their therapist, and the counseling relationship would utilize humanistically oriented letters written by the therapist and mailed to the client between counseling sessions. Excluding criteria for this study were clients under the age of 18, clients with developmental delay concerns that impair normal judgment, and any clients with cognitively disabling mental health diagnoses, such as Schizophrenia, that might make it difficult for the client to connect to the same reality the counselor wrote about in the therapeutic letter. The clinicians assisting in this study were additionally asked to use their clinical judgment when selecting potential candidates for participation in the study.
The assisting counselors in conjunction with this research project extended an invitation through the use of a recruitment script (see Appendix A) to each of their present clients and those clients with whom they began a counseling relationship during the course of the study to participate in this research project by receiving a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter during the counseling relationship. Each client was advised that there was to be no penalty for non-participation in the study and that should they decline participation, they were still able to continue counseling with their counselor. Clients that chose to participate were provided with informed consent paperwork by their counselor, a release of information form to the primary researcher for initial contact and screening, and demographic paperwork for research purposes (see Appendices B, C, D). Clients were also advised of the research project and provided with specific information about participant expectations. Clients that completed the release of information were then contacted by the researcher via phone, and a formal interview was set up at a confidential location of their choosing (private rooms at public libraries and the counseling agency in which they were receiving therapeutic services) to discuss the research project in greater detail and to provide each participant with documentation necessary to participate in the research experience. During this interview, participants were encouraged to ask questions to ensure their understanding as to what was expected of them as participants. Participants were advised of their counselor’s relationship with the primary researcher regarding the construction of therapeutic letters used in the study. They were additionally informed of the research process, including the interview protocol and the purposes of interviewing participants on two separate occasions to ensure
accuracy of the findings. Informed consent and confidentiality were reviewed with each potential participant, and both verbal and written consent from participants were obtained.

For the purposes of this study, it was determined that clients needed to receive one therapeutic letter from their counselor in order to be able to render a detailed description of their experience, which is consistent with phenomenological research, in that all participants in the study must have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 1998). Boyd (2001) determined that between 2 and 10 participants are necessary for saturation in a phenomenological study. Polkinghorne (1989) advised that the sample in phenomenological research should be sufficiently large enough, that it contains an appropriate amount of participants that are able to provide diverse accounts of their relationship to the phenomenon of interest. Concerning participant sample sizes in qualitative research, Sandelowski (1995) suggested, “An adequate sample size . . . is one that permits . . . the deep, case-oriented analysis . . . that results in a new and richly textured understanding of experience” (p. 182). In addition, the previous investigation of narrative letter writing in nursing practice with patients involved three families to capture detailed and rich descriptions of patient experiences of receiving a narrative-oriented therapeutic letter from their nurse practitioners (Moules, 2000). My primary goal as the researcher was to select enough participants that would be consistent with the recommendations suggested by other phenomenological research in order to receive sufficient statements concerning participants’ lived experience of the phenomenon of
interest and simultaneously to not be overwhelmed by the possibilities surrounding too many participant accounts for the breadth of this study.

The final sample size for this study consisted of six individuals who voluntarily consented to engage in this research project as participants and who were currently in a counseling relationship with their counselor who wrote one humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter over the course of their therapeutic experience.

**Participant Experience and Requirements**

The additional requirement for participation in the study was the participant capacity to consent to an initial 30 to 45 minute taped interview with the researcher concerning his or her lived experiences of receiving a humanistically-oriented letter from his or her counselor during the counseling process and a second follow-up interview of between 25 to 40 minutes to go over key points from the first interview and to ensure accuracy of findings with the participant.

Participants were thoroughly taken through the informed consent process, verbally and in writing (Bailey, 1996), with the researcher, advising them of the meaning and expectations of their participation in the study and the limits and scope of confidentiality involved in research with human subjects. Participants were informed that every measure would be taken by the researcher to ensure confidentiality, including the use of a pseudonym for each participant and varying any identifying information that would place confidentiality at risk. Participants were informed by the researcher that within two weeks of the reception of their initial humanistically-oriented letter from their counselor, they would be asked to submit to an initial semi-structured interview with the
researcher to dialogue about their experiences of receiving the letter during the
counseling process. These interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed
thoroughly by the researcher. The research team additionally supported the researcher in
reviewing the transcripts for thematic analysis. A follow-up interview was conducted
with each participant to ensure accuracy of findings and to clarify any aspects revealed in
the initial interview that might have been confusing or have need of being explored more
descriptively. The interview process for this research is described in greater detail in a
later section of this chapter.

Saturation, or redundancy and areas of overlap in the findings derived from
participant statements, was the primary goal regarding participation in the investigation,
including the interview and interpretation phases of the research (Wertz, 2005). The
research found that while there were many shared experiences amongst the participants’
descriptions regarding the phenomenon of letter writing in counseling, there were also
unique descriptions that were not shared, collectively. These statements were included in
the phenomenological reduction stages of interpretation and representation. After central
thematic statements were obtained from the participants through the interview format
described above, I terminated my research relationship with each participant.
Participants were encouraged to explore any unresolved issues that arose as a result of
their participation in the study with their therapist. A closing letter for each participant
was provided to each participant, thanking them for their cooperation and willingness to
participate in the study.
Counselor as Co-Researcher

In addition to the participant-clients involved in this study, two counselors aided the researcher by recruiting clients for the study and by writing a counseling letter to each participating client between therapeutic appointments. For the purpose of this study, two counselors (CT, PCC-S) were contacted who had expressed interest in using counseling letters with clients. The counselor trainee (CT) is currently under the supervision of an independently licensed professional counselor (Ph.D.) with the supervisory credential (PCC-S) at a large public community mental health agency in northeastern Ohio. The master's counseling student, at this setting is currently licensed as a Counselor Trainee by the Counseling Board for the State of Ohio to provide therapeutic services, under direct supervision, to clients seeking mental health services. He has worked primarily with college students struggling with depression, anxiety, and transition issues, and adults and adolescents with multiple mental health concerns. His primary theoretical approach to working with clients is existential-humanistic.

In the second clinical setting, a private practice in Northeastern Ohio, the counselor (Ph.D.) is an independently licensed professional counselor with the supervisory credential and has been practicing professionally for over five years and has provided individual, couples, and family therapy to clients in both community mental health and private practice settings. She primarily practices from a narrative, post-modern perspective but is also eclectic within the humanistic perspective, drawing from theoretical orientations such as existential and person centered. She provides clinical services to adults and adolescents with varying mental health diagnoses and problems of living and works frequently with
couples and families. She reported that the most common presenting concerns the clients she meets with on a daily basis are depression, anxiety, interpersonal difficulties, and concerns related to grief and loss and transition.

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix K), I requested permission from the community mental health agency through their IRB committee for consent to conduct the study in their setting. I additionally requested a consent for study at the private practice setting. Both settings provided letters authorizing the study to be conducted (see Appendices I & J). Both counselors participating in the study were asked to write at least one counseling letter to each participant-client during the course of the therapy experience. They were supported by the researcher over the course of the study in drafting letters that were consistent with humanistic principles regarding the counseling experience.

I used two counselors in this study due to the subjective variability of relatedness, expressed in the interpersonal environment of the counseling relationship as well as through the medium of relatedness contained in letter writing. This enabled me to be in a close relationship with both counselors in this study, where I was able to assist them in developing a working understanding of the unique composition of elements that constitute a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter. I aided both counselors throughout the process by supporting them in drafting counseling letters that maintained a humanistic tone in each of the letters that were composed and provided to the participants (clients) involved in this study by their counselor. The counselors were provided with a
list of guidelines concerning humanistic letter writing and were asked to adhere to these conditions in the composition of each client letter.

**Permission to Conduct Research With Human Beings**

Due to the fact that this study involves research with humans, an IRB or Human Subjects Form to participate in research was completed and reviewed by IRB committee members at the researcher institution, Kent State University. Upon approval of the proposal (see Appendix K), I submitted this information to the review board at the public mental health agency and private practice setting involved in the study for approval. After the approval was obtained from this agency, the research participants were contacted and selected for the study (see Appendix L).

**Informed Consent and Confidentiality**

As described above, each consenting participant was provided the opportunity for informed consent, both in a written and dialogic manner to ensure that their consent was both voluntary and reflected an informed stance of awareness regarding the meaning of their participation in this study (see Appendices A & B). The dialogic nature of the screening process was constituted by an initial meeting with each participant to address concerns they had upon entering the study as well as to educate them about the objectives of the research experience and to answer participants’ questions. Participants were informed that they have the right to terminate the counseling relationship and their role in the research process at any time they wish. During this time, participants were informed verbally and in writing about the nature of the phenomenological interviews and the primary focus being concerned with their unique experience of the phenomenon of
receiving a humanistically-framed letter from their counselor at some interval of the

counseling relationship. Client informed consent and other appropriate signed

paperwork, including the client demographic form (see Appendix C) for this study, were

collected and stored in a confidential location that only I had access to due to the

sensitive nature of the research experience. I advised each participant that I would

provide assistance for their counselor to aid them in crafting letters that are consistent

with the purposes of this study but that the essence of each letter would reflect the

counselor’s voice and the nature of the relationship between the counselor and the client.
I additionally advised each participant that I would not discuss with the counselor the

specifics regarding the concerns the participants were bringing to work on in the

counseling relationship with the counselor.

**Recruitment**

For this study, participants were recruited through the assistance of two

professional colleagues in counseling practice. I contacted both professional colleagues

and asked them about their interest in being a participating counselor in a study about the

experiences of clients who receive a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter from their

counselor. I explained to them the objectives for this study, his or her responsibility as

the counselor writing the therapeutic letters to clients he or she meets with, and the

expectations of clients who choose to participate in the study. We also discussed how he

or she would invite potential clients to participate in the study. After obtaining each

counselor’s verbal and written consent and demographic form (see Appendices E & F),

both counselors were asked to invite clients with whom they were currently meeting and
that met the specified criteria for recruitment to participate in the research (see Appendix A). Both counselors agreed to extend invitations, both in writing and verbally, to current clients they thought might be interested in receiving therapeutic letters during their counseling experiences as well as to participate in research concerning their experiences of receiving letters during therapy. Clients were identified for this research as participants in this phenomenological investigation of humanistic letter writing in counseling. Each cooperating participant was notified that they would receive a $30.00 Visa gift card at the conclusion of his or her follow-up interview as payment for his or her time and involvement in this study.

Participants were selected through their voluntary consent to engage in this research as a participant. Each consenting participant agreed, both verbally and in written form, to participate in the study.

**Methodological Scaffolding for This Study**

Potential research participants who expressed an interest to their counselor concerning the nature of this research completed the “Release of Information for Participation in Research Form” (see Appendix D) and were contacted by me via an introductory phone call. This conversation provided a brief overview of the research process and participant responsibilities and arranged an initial appointment to discuss the research at more length, including my expectations and the detailed nature of their participation.
Interviewing Procedures

After the counselor made the initial contact with each client-participant and the consent forms (see Appendix D) were completed by each participant for contact from me, as researcher, I contacted each participant to set up a date and time for an initial meeting to orient them to the research experience. In the initial, informal meeting with each participant, I outlined the central question of this research, “What is your experience of receiving a letter from your counselor between counseling sessions?” Clients were informed in written and spoken form about their rights as research participants and the voluntary nature of their participation. I additionally explained their involvement as participants in the study, including expectations regarding the primary and follow-up semi-structured interview process (see Appendix H). My contact information was provided to each participant. I reviewed informed consent with participants and advised the participants of information they will be receiving in the mail, including an introductory letter outlining, in some detail, the nature of the research and their roles as research participants.

An initial face-to-face interview was scheduled between the participant and me at a confidential location of their choosing, such as the counseling agency where they were receiving mental health services or a local confidential setting agreed upon by the researcher and client, in between the time the client received the letter from his or her counselor and the subsequent follow-up counseling appointment in order to preserve the freshness of participant experiences with the phenomenon and capture these rich descriptions in an interview format. The audio-taped interviews began after the
participants had read and signed the consent for permission to audiotape form (see Appendix G).

The interview format followed in this study follows Pollio et al.’s (1997), Holstein and Gubrium’s (1995), and J. A. Smith and Osborn’s (2008) guidelines concerning the semi-structured format. The interviews were conceptualized as collaborative and mutual conversations between two persons (Pollio et al., 1997). The quality of the phenomenological interview is primarily influenced by the relationship that is developed with participants throughout the investigatory process. A trusting and respectful relationship between researcher and research participants, where both are deeply interested in increasing their understanding about the phenomenological experience under study, lends itself to the possibility of acquiring richer information pertaining to participant experiences of the phenomenon. Gadamer (1975) explained that phenomenological conversations are centralized around the openness of questions and the encouragement provided by the researcher toward participants to explore deeper meaning in a mutually, acknowledging way.

We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. It is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation or even that we become involved in it.

(p. 383)

Kvale (1996) suggested that as the researcher actively strives to suspend his or her beliefs concerning the phenomenon of interest, he or she focuses primarily on the phenomenon as it is experienced by the participant, which leads to the creation of
dialogue between the researcher and the participant. This dialogue is made phenomenologically distinctive due to the spontaneous creation or emergence of meaning in the context of researcher and participant “falling” into conversation with one another concerning the core experiences of the participant’s relationship to the phenomenon. This conversational relatedness between researcher and participant points to the dialogic nature and the context of interconnectedness mutually created during the interview process by researcher and researchee (Kvale, 1996).

Phenomenological interviews are designed to elicit descriptions of participants’ direct experiences as they are uniquely lived—not the researcher thinking about the experience but an intentionally heavy focus on what the participant describes, with specific attention to the minute details that constitute the expression (Pollio et al., 1997). The phenomenological researcher pays careful attention to how experiences emerge, ensuring to engage with the participant in such a way so that the participant is choosing what experiences to reveal, descriptively, through the interview format.

Within phenomenology, conversations are made distinctive through the use of intentionally-framed questions concerned with the quality of relatedness between researcher and researchee and simultaneously, with the primary aspects of participant experience. Gadamer (1975) highlighted the vital importance of questioning in the phenomenological interview process with participants: “Posing a question implies openness but also limitation . . . Hence, a question can be asked rightly or wrongly, according as it reaches into the sphere of the truly open or fails to do so” (pp. 363-364).
Horowitz and Amir (1974) and Geanellos (1999) explained that the researcher utilizes an intentionally semi-structured, conversational interview format with participants in an attempt to embrace more complete participant experiences with the overarching intent of discovering the central elements that constitute their experiences. New questions arise in response to the spontaneous shifts in the conversation between the researcher and participant as guided by the researchee’s descriptions. Experience is revealed through the subtle, yet intentional efforts by the researcher to support the participant in clarifying and probing their own experiences for deeper and more richly expressed statements concerning their relationship to the phenomenon of interest.

Van Manen (1990) suggested that the phenomenological interview is, in essence, a means to investigate and collect experientially rich information that might potentially operate as a resource for creating a richer and more profound understanding of a particular human phenomenon. He additionally suggested that the interview primarily functions as a medium to facilitate a conversational relationship with a research participant concerning the meaning of their experience(s) with relation to the investigated phenomenon.

Concretely described here, the interview process used in this study closely resembles Stevick’s (1971) example of phenomenological inquiry. The researcher relied on an informal, interactive process that made use of open ended comments and questions in an attempt to encourage the research participant to reflect, cognitively and affectively, on their experience(s). Special attention was paid to moments of particular awareness and impact concerning the relationship between the phenomenon of interest and the
participant in an effort to support the participant in describing these experiences more fully, or in other words, the participant’s consciousness or relationship to the phenomenal world of receiving a letter from his or her counselor between counseling sessions.

The interview approach for this study was directed by a concern for each participant’s experience of receiving a letter during counseling as reported via the medium of qualitative interviews. In order to do this, the interview was based on F. G. Wood’s (1991) and Patton’s (1990) qualitative interviewing models, where one opening question was asked of each participant at the beginning of the initial interview in conjunction with a series of linked questions that are concerned with the participant’s personal characteristics, experience or behavior questions, opinion and valuing questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, and sensory questions as appropriate. Following the recommendations of Britten (1997), the interviews were given some structure to ensure that the retrieved data was relevant to the research question. The Heideggarian approach (Miller & Glassner, 1997) was employed for interviewing which helped to foster an environment of inter-subjectivity with respect to the participant’s experience of receiving the letters and talking about the experience after the fact. The literature (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Lowes & Gill, 2006) concerning descriptive phenomenological interviews suggests that in addition to the information that is gathered through the interview format, both the researcher and the participants in the study often report about the positive therapeutic effects of the interviewing experience in their personal lives.

In order to remain faithful to the fundamental research question this study is interested in expanding through phenomenological interviews, participant responses to
the primary research question, “What is your experience of receiving a letter from your counselor between appointments?” was bracketed or categorized into a data set that was interpreted independently from participant responses to additional questions during the interview process. It was assumed by that in-depth phenomenological interviews conducted with participants after the fact would potentially influence the descriptions that were provided through conversation concerning the experience of receiving the letter and the meanings that were created, dialogically between researcher and participant. It was decided by the research team and me, as researcher, that since the primary aim of this study was to explore the meanings and essences clients give to their experience of receiving a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter between counseling sessions, that the research interviews would support each participant in expanding their experience concerning the what and the how of their experience in a semi-structured format. Subsequent questioning would be kept to a minimum in order to ensure that the study can effectively speak to participant experiences of receiving a counseling letter without the influence of post-reflective, in-depth interviews that could potentially influence the nature of the data. In this respect, I intentionally worked to maintain the methodological purposes of the study by having the interviews focus on the participant’s experience instead of taking the additional step toward additional research questions such as, “What is it like to talk about having this experience?” This step was taken in order to preserve the research aims for this study and to respect the descriptions that were created through phenomenological interviews with particular attention to the actual experiences of clients who receive a counseling letter during the counseling process.
Each interview began with a broad statement or question concerning the focus of the investigation and additional questions emerged spontaneously from the rhythm of relatedness between the researcher and participant. Questions were posed in order to support the participant in providing detailed descriptions of the phenomenon as he or she experienced it. Phenomenological inquiry does not assume the discovery of answers. I attempted to ground questions around the lived experiences of participants, focusing on feelings, thoughts, and attitudes about the essences that are expressed in their responses, with a clear and intentional concentration on what is happening or what was experienced in the internal world of the participant, so as to locate, experientially, the participant’s unique relationship to the phenomenon. Throughout the interview process, I employed the use of memo-ing before and after the interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1984) as a methodological tool to record thoughts, feelings, and other sensory absorptions of participant experience during the interview process. This supported me in reflecting on what was actually transpiring in the relational space between researcher and participant as they are rendering their story as well as in preserving a proper equilibrium between descriptive and reflective notations in participant disclosure such as internal hunches and fantasies.

**General interview protocol.** The general interview guide (see Appendix H) for the initial long, semi-structured interview with each participant consists of the following tentatively-held questions concerning the participant’s relationship to the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994).
1. What is it like to receive a therapeutic letter from your counselor in-between counseling sessions?

2. Also, describe any experiences that stand out most for you in regards to your experience of the letter you received from your counselor during your counseling experiences.

3. Describe those aspects of your experience of receiving the letter that stand out most for you right now.

4. Talk about how the experience affected you.

5. Can you talk in some detail about the impact of the letter on the work you did or are doing in counseling?

6. How did receiving a letter from your counselor in-between sessions impact other aspects of your life?

7. Describe some of your feelings regarding your experience of receiving a letter from your counselor.

8. Describe how you felt at the time of your experience (i.e., opening the letter in the mail, sitting down and reading it for the first time, etc.)?

9. Have you shared all that is most significant in relationship to your experience of receiving a letter from your counselor during your therapeutic experiences?

**Follow-up experiences.** Shortly after the conclusion of the initial interview, a copy of the transcribed interview was provided to each participant to ensure that I accurately recorded participant statements. A follow-up appointment was made with each participant, enabling a return to the participant in order to present the findings to
him or her so that the research participant could hold up the analysis of the information with their own experience (Colaizzi, 1978). Any corrections or changes that the research participants identified either in the transcribed interview or in the analysis were discussed and integrated into the final analysis. The methodological intentionality of this follow-up interview was consistent with the use of participant member-checks in order to increase the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some of the primary guiding questions demarcating the second interview with participants were:

1. After reflecting on our first interview together, including the copy of the transcript you received in the mail, what have been some of the persistent thoughts and feelings that have emerged in you?
2. Are there any gaps or places you wanted to talk about more in detail or clarify?
3. If you could say anything additional about your experience of receiving a letter from your counselor and the meanings you give to the letter’s impact in your counseling experience, what might you want to express?
4. A check for accuracy of findings. I would report some of the themes along with a summative analysis of the first interview and ask the participant, “Do these descriptions match your experience? If so, how? If they don’t, can you help me understand how and in what ways?”

During this audio-recorded follow-up interview with the participant, any revelatory or corrected information that emerged was integrated into the final synthesis of the research. This second interview also provided an opportunity to ask questions concerning emerging themes in participant statements and to clarify and deepen
participant descriptions that might have been vaguely detailed during the initial interview. Participants were advised of these additive descriptions being integrated into the summative analysis of the research. At the conclusion of the second interview, participants were informed that they would be receiving a concluding letter in the mail that also included their monetary compensation for participation in the study.

**Data Analysis: Synthesizing and Making Sense**

If I want to determine what something really is, I must turn to the experience in which the something is present to my consciousness; therein I will find an intentional structure, and that intentional structure properly analyzed will reveal to me all that can be revealed with regard to the object toward which my experience is oriented. This structure of intentionality is the fundamental structure of any phenomenon; it is present to my consciousness prior to any reflection upon it, but in order to know what the experience of it is and thus to know what is experienced, I must penetrate into all the intentions which make up its structure, and I must do so in such a way as completely to validate these intentions as intentions of this object and of no other. To the extent that one has grasped any object as distinguishable from any other, one has an ‘essential’ grasp of that object. (Lauer, 1965, p. 42)

In this phenomenological research, data analysis happened concurrently with data collection. The researcher began to analyze the data during the first interview with each participant. Data analysis that is done concurrently with data collection enabled me to make meaningful modifications throughout the process, even to the extent of shifting the data collection process in order to experiment with novel participant expressions and themes against a canopy of retrieved data (Merriam, 2002). Phenomenological data analysis closely resembled an inductive process, in which the researcher began with a small piece of perceptual information, such as a word, phrase, or story, and held this up against other units of data, while intentionally striving to discover shared relationships amongst the collected data from research participants.
Reading for a Sense of the Whole

The organization of the data retrieved from participant interviews occurred both during the interviews through the use of memoing employed by the researcher and after the transcriptions were immediately completed, verbatim, in order to maintain a strong relationship to lived experiences of participants (van Manen, 1990). I read the interviews to begin the process of becoming thoroughly acquainted with the constitutive parts, or the individualized meaning units and essences, of the descriptions as well as the thematic whole of each participant’s experience in conjunction with other participant expressions. In the interpretive relationship to the transcribed data, I attempted to recognize unifying patterns and themes that tie participant expressions together. This process aided me in finding relationship amongst the themes in order to formulate a unifying structure of phenomenological experience. Interpretive acts made in the research were defined phenomenologically as weaving in a connective thread that led to understanding without making inferences about the data. Participant expressions, constitutive of the actual words and language undertones, were adhered to in the interpretive process, and I went back and forth, reciprocally, between the text and the participants, in a deliberate attempt to search for the whole of experience as well as for a relationship amongst the varying themes that appeared in the descriptions.

Method of Analysis

The primary method of analysis used in this phenomenological study is the Van Kaam method of analysis (1959), supplemented by methodological analysis procedures proposed by van Manen (1990) and Moustakas (1994). I outline this process below.
I continued to employ the epoché process during the transcription and interpretive phases of the phenomenological model (Henley & Thompson, 1993), consistent with Moustakas’ (1994) method of phenomenological reduction. I utilized reflective journaling concerning the interview experiences as well as through informal interviews with members of the research group in order to bracket personally-held biases and assumptions about the statements made by participants so that participant viewpoints emerged from the transcribed data freshly and without researcher distortion (Moran, 2000). Practicing epoché enabled a descriptive process, whereby I worked to sharpen awareness of all inclinations toward interpretation that read more into the phenomenon than was actually there, thus freeing me from as much prejudice as possible. Spinelli (1989) articulated that the researcher learns to be content with uninterpreted portrayals of what is actually experienced and revealed by the participant with an enlarged focus on the facts and the content itself versus the researcher’s tendency to pre-judge the aspects of the rendered experience that are more significant or revelatory than others. Copies of the transcribed interviews and descriptive accounts of the data were also provided to a peer reviewer during the interpretive process in order to enhance the credibility of the findings (Newman & Benz, 1998).

**Phenomenological reduction.** Moustakas (1994) advised that the following step when practicing phenomenological reduction is to horizontalize each participant statement, viewing them as being equal in value. Horizontalization suggests that one’s experience can never be exhausted entirely regardless of the amount of times the experience(s) is revisited. Just like the figure/ground concept in gestalt theory, a new
horizon, or figure, emerges each time that one recedes or fades into the background of self-awareness (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1994). During the horizontalization process, it is conceivable that multiple horizons or figures could be held simultaneously in an attempt to investigate experience. As each new horizon emerges into awareness, it was considered to the extent that it enabled the researcher(s) to penetrate and understand the participant’s relationship to the phenomenon of interest. A continuous cycle of horizons emerged, received focused attention, and then faded into the background of awareness. This process continued throughout the interpretive phase of analyzing participant statements, with no one horizon of perspective being viewed by the researcher as less or more significant than another.

**Horizontalization.** Horizontalizing data enabled me, as researcher, to look at the perceptions of the participant from varied angles, placing equal worth on each perception, such that every perception adds something important to the experience (Moustakas, 1994). As each horizon of experience was identified and labeled, meaning units were distilled and woven into clusters of statements or themes that captured the constitutive essence(s) of participant experience. Overlapping and redundant participant statements were removed as themes were recorded and crystallized into textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenological nature of the co-researcher’s experience of therapeutic letters in the counseling experience. The textural descriptions that emerged through the horizontalized data then gave way to the development of composite structural descriptions that embody a universal understanding concerning how the participants as a group experienced the phenomenon of humanistically-oriented therapeutic letters in
counseling. Individual structural descriptions represented the unique accounts obtained from each participant, which contained a specific account of the underlying dynamics of individual experience, inclusive of the themes and thematic constitutive essences that explained the existence of participant feelings and thoughts concerning their unique connectedness to the phenomenon of interest.

Moustakas (1994) suggested that those horizons that emerge as containing invariant qualities of the experience, universally, are categorized into themes, or individual textural descriptions that contain characteristics that persist across contexts. I strove to describe in textural language what was seen in the experiences that were rendered as such, the rhythm and the relationship between phenomenon and self and a deliberate and repetitious recycling of looking and describing, looking again and describing, and looking again and describing, while maintaining an intentional focus on the textural qualities revealed in participant descriptions. The ultimate hope through this process of describing the essence of the phenomenal experience, inclusive of its meaning units and organizing themes, is that the interested audience will walk away from the investigation with the feeling of, “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

Moustakas (1994) described phenomenological reduction primarily as a way of listening with a conscious and thoughtful intention of opening oneself to a phenomenon as it “is perceived freshly . . . as if for the first time” (p. 34). These descriptions are then transformed into a larger cluster or unifying textural description in regards to the phenomenon.
Assuming the phenomenological attitude. In order to begin the phenomenological process of interpretation and analysis of participant descriptions, it was necessary that I assumed the phenomenological attitude (Giorgi, 2009), or strived to regard everything from the perspective of pure consciousness and to look at all participant revelations of how they are experienced, subjectively and uniquely, by each participant, independent of whether or not they existed in the way they were described in experience. The phenomenological attitude demanded the researcher to prolong his or her relationship with each disclosure rendered by the participant in order to gain an experiential sense of the full significance of the participants’ experiences and to magnify one’s sense of wonder and curiosity about the manner in which the participants lived the particular phenomenon, internally.

Some activities suggested by Giorgi (2009) that supported the cultivation and expansion of this intrapersonal attitude in the researcher in this study were primarily reflective in nature. I reflected on my judgment, asking introspective questions such as, “What does this person’s statement express about the phenomenon and how is it relevant?” In order to determine, universally, the thematic elements of participant experiences of the phenomenon of interest, I asked the question during the interpretative phase of the analytical process, “What has this to do with the whole, what place does it occupy, and what contribution is it making? What has this one to do with the other one, and that one, and so on?” Conclusively, I sought verification of participant experiences by asking the reflective question, “Is everything in the participant’s description somehow mirrored in my consciousness?” This reflective stance was held in order to maintain a
lived connection with participant descriptions and to compose an authentically accurate description that actually expresses what was there in the participant’s lived experience of the phenomenon, individually and universally.

Van Manen (1990) additionally suggested a series of questions the phenomenological researcher needs to ask himself or herself throughout the interpretive process of reading the transcribed experiences of participants in order to discover thematic statements from the phenomenological descriptions expressed by the co-researchers in the study. Some of these questions are, “What sententious phrase captures, most clearly, the fundamental meaning of the text, holistically?” “What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem acutely essential or revelatory concerning the phenomenon being described?” and “What does this particular sentence or grouping of sentences say about the phenomenon being described by the participant?” A reflective and sensitive reading of the text augmented the potential for the emergence of deeply held, experiential meanings concerning the participant relation to the phenomenon of interest. The discovered themes then constructed the scaffolding that constitutes the phenomenological experiences, universally shared and uniquely held by the participants in this study.

**Staying with essences and descriptions.** My primary task throughout the analytical process was to search, exhaustively, for the phenomenological essence(s) of experience within each participant description and to ascertain what was most essential about it. Throughout this study, I attempted to stay close to the perceptual descriptions of the essences in participant statements and simultaneously bracketed my assumptions and prior knowledge concerning the phenomenological expressions, giving special attention
to what was presently before me in its most elemental sense. Giorgi (1970, 1975b) outlined three general steps to investigating the data from the transcribed interviews.

1. Read for a sense of the whole. Here, the researcher focuses primarily on reading through the entire text to glean a wholistic sense (van Manen, 1990) of what is there within the description.

2. Determine meaning units housed within each description. The researcher returns to the beginning of the transcript and reads it more deliberately, line by line (van Manen, 1990), highlighting every description in which a significant shift in meaning occurs. Each meaning unit is delineated from another through the course of this methodically, cautious reading.

3. Transforming participant’s natural attitudinal expressions into phenomenologically sensitive expressions. This final step is made distinctive by the researcher’s meticulous way of describing, with exactness, the features of the experienced phenomenon as they emerged in the reader’s (the researcher) consciousness in a nonjudging and uninterpretive manner. The researcher then strives to exhaustively question each meaning unit in order to grasp, tentatively, in a more accurate way the psychological potentialities of expressed descriptions of participants concerning their lived experiences of the phenomenon. During this final phase of analysis of the transcribed data, the researcher employs a reflective loop of detecting, drawing out, and elaborating, looking again and again and again at each individual description in order to engage the text in such a way that each experiences can be
compressed into language, such that a richer content of experience can be retrieved and rendered in words.

**Imaginative variation.** During this interpretive phase of reduction of the phenomenological data, I interrogated, analytically, each individual meaning unit, constitutive of participant perceptions, or the primary source of phenomenological knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). A primary step in the transformative phase of this analysis was imaginative variation (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2004) in order to see what was truly essential about each meaning unit that composed the thematic structure of the phenomenon under study. Imaginative variation enabled me to precisely describe the primary invariant related meanings associated with the experience, which leads to the more general essences shared by each participant with relation to the phenomenon of interest. These transformed meaning units were then rendered in a reliable statement concerning each participant’s experience.

Writing about the universal context of a phenomenological experience, van Manen (1990) explained, “In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme, our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (p. 107). Moustakas (1994) described imaginative variation as the researcher’s intentional choice to vary meanings concerning the possible perspectives about the phenomenon. This process facilitated the emergence of additional gradations of meaning in participant experiences with relationship to the phenomenon of client experiences of humanistic letter writing in counseling. One way I varied the primary viewpoint rendered by the participants to the
question, “Describe some of the meanings involved in your experience of receiving a therapeutic letter from your counselor between counseling sessions,” was to envisage (as the researcher) how the participant’s expression of meaning would be dissimilar if conceptualized from the different perspective, such as, “Describe how receiving a therapeutic letter from your counselor did not generate any meaning for you.” Other creative mediums were utilized to support the participant in revealing obscured aspects of their experience (Moran, 2000), such as writing a response letter to the counselor and journaling to themselves and outlining in some detail the impact and meanings they experienced when reading the letter initially or subsequent re-readings. Imaginative variation aided in acquiring structural descriptions by asking about the context, such as time, interrelatedness, and space, in order to obtain structural descriptions, or the underlying dynamics of the experiences as lived by each participant that account for the “how” in participant descriptions in addition to the details constituting the descriptions of experience, or individual textural descriptions. Through imaginative variation, I was able to vary each aspect of the experience in the participant descriptions in order to determine what must be involved for the unique composition of the individual’s psychological reality to be exactly what it is.

**Interpretation of Transcribed Interviews**

The primary method of analysis guiding the interpretive relationship with the transcribed interviews is the van Kaam (1959) model. These steps briefly are listed here and are described in greater detail below: (a) listing and preliminary grouping; (b) reducing and eliminating to determine the invariant constituents or meaning units; (c)
clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents; (d) identifying the invariant constituents and themes through application and validation; (e) using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes to create for each participant an individual textural description of the experience, including precise examples from the transcribed interview; (f) creating an individual structural description of the experience for each participant based on the individual textural description and imaginative variation procedure; and finally, (g) creating a textural-structural description of the meanings and constitutive essences of the experience for each participant, integrating the invariant constituents and themes universal to the phenomenon as expressed by the co-researchers in the study (Moustakas, 1994).

**Sensing the whole.** After conducting the initial interview with each participant, my interest shifted toward reading and re-reading the transcribed narratives in order to gain a felt sense of the whole of each of the participant experiences. After giving close attention to each of the experiences, I attempted to break down the whole into smaller, more condensed units of meaning that were derivative of participants’ significant statements concerning their unique experience of the phenomenon of letter writing in counseling. Applying the first step of analysis, I attempted to list every participant expression that was germane to the experience, being careful to horizontalize all statements such that as the researcher, I was able to remain open to the possibilities that obscured expressions (including those that are potentially marginalized as being perceptually unimportant) revealed for the phenomenological investigation of experience. Horizontalization necessitated my attitude of receptivity toward each statement within
participant experience, which lent itself to a reciprocal and mutual relationship between
the participants and me, as researcher, in the study during the interpretive phases and to
the acquisition of the essences that constituted participant experiences of the phenomenon
(Moustakas, 1994). In essence, as the researcher attended sensitively and
nonjudgmentally to the textual descriptions of participant experiences, the primary
interpretive question asked was, “What is beneath each expression and can what is found
be viewed in an analogous light, one to the other, or are they expressing something quite
dissimilar from the other?”

**Discriminatory relationship.** The next step was primarily concerned with testing
and discrimination, where each participant’s expressions were assessed for two
fundamental pre-requisites for inclusion: (a) Did it include a moment of the experience
that is a vital and satisfactory ingredient for comprehending it? and (b) Was it feasible to
extract and categorize it? If so, it was considered a horizon of the participant’s
relationship to the phenomenon. Any statements that did not meet these requirements
were not considered for description. Any statements that were redundant or indistinct
were either removed or portrayed in a more precise and descriptive way. The residual
horizons were viewed as the invariant constituents, or meaning units, of participant
experience (Moustakas, 1994; van Kaam, 1959).

**Invariant units of meaning.** These horizons of participant experience then
shaped the process of clustering the invariant constituents of the phenomenological
relationship participants held experientially in receiving a humanistically therapeutic
letter from their counselor in-between counseling sessions. The invariant ingredients of
participants’ experiences were intentionally grouped, or clustered, into a thematic
description or label. These grouped constituents became the definitive themes of
participant experience (Moustakas, 1994) and were paramount for crafting a detailed
description of the emerging essences of the participants’ experiences and the creation of a
coherent synthesis of the fundamental construct of the transcribed data. The invariant
constituents also gave form to the interpretive scaffolding to construe the meanings
revealed by the participants that most accurately captured the participant’s lived
experiences of the phenomenon (Biley & Galvin, 2007).

According to van Kaam (1959), I then strove to verify the invariant constituents
and their corresponding themes against all of the data obtained from each participant, and
then asked the following two questions, sequentially: (a) Were they rendered
unambiguously in the complete transcription? and (b) If they were not clearly stated,
were they harmonious? If these two conditions were not met, the invariant constituents
were eliminated from the interpretive phase of the analysis.

**Individual Textural Description**

I then utilized the validated invariant ingredients of participant experience,
inclusive of themes and grasped essences, and crafts for each participant an Individual
Textural Description of the phenomenological experience. The primary orientation of a
textural description for this study was: “What was each client’s experience of receiving a
humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter from his or her counselor between counseling
appointments?” Word-for-word examples, as expressed by the participant, were used
from each of the transcribed interviews. For the case of this study, the holistic
composition and focus of the experience of receiving a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter from the counselor over the course of the therapeutic process, as expressed by the participant, was provided to each participant in order to check for accuracy of the findings and to obtain further descriptions about the nuances of particular aspects of participant experience. Examples of questions that I asked participants during the follow-up interview were: (a) To what extent have I captured your experience of receiving a therapeutic letter from your counselor between counseling sessions? (b) What aspects of your experience have I missed or not expressed clearly that you feel would be important to your experience of therapeutic letters during counseling? and (c) What is the quality of your representation in this description? This information revealed in these interviews was then integrated into the composite textural-structural synthesis in order to grasp, more vividly, the objects of experience and the meanings and essences constitutive of participants’ universal relationship with humanistic letter writing in counseling.

**Individual structural description.** In addition, an Individual Structural Description was created for each participant to assist in grasping the underlying descriptive essences of experience that were shared by the participants in this study. The structural descriptions of participants’ experiences were primarily interested with answering the question, “Describe the context in which you had this experience and in what ways did your own personal context shape your experience-as-a-whole?” These descriptions provided a thorough explanation of the primary dynamics of the fundamental nature of the phenomenological experience, inclusive of definitive themes and characteristics that closely considered the feelings, thoughts, meanings, and attitudes that
were connected to participants’ relationships to the phenomenon of therapeutic letter writing in their counseling experiences.

**Following up with participants to deepen understanding.** The follow-up interview was an essential component of the phenomenological investigation, in that it deepened the dialogic space between participant and me, as researcher, as well as the interrelatedness between the participant and the phenomenological experience. The use of an informal and non-standardized interview process with each participant during the follow-up phase of the inquiry lent itself to the emergence of spontaneous data and the clarification of descriptions rendered in both the individual textural and structural descriptions created from a deliberate synthesis of the transcribed interviews of participant experience. The yielded product was a composite textural and structural description, which embodied and summarized the group of participants as a whole and the universal themes and essences that tied, somewhat seamlessly, their experiences concerning what it was like for a client in a counseling relationship to receive a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter from their counselor between counseling sessions (Hycner, 1999). The composite textural and structural descriptions, in essence, offered a detailed explanation of how the research participants, collectively, went through what they experienced concerning the phenomenon of interest. After the composite textural and structural descriptions were created, a textural-structural description was developed in order to describe summatively the shared aspects of participants’ experiences of the phenomenon of receiving a counseling letter from their therapist.
Concerns of Validity, Reliability, Rigor, Dependability, and Confirmability

In order to arrive, intentionally, at a place of experiential validity concerning this study, I ask myself the question that underlines phenomenological representation: “Have I rendered this experience through a first-person lens of experiential telling?” Giorgi (1976) suggested that one of the primary determining elements of validity in a phenomenological study is whether or not the interested audience, striving to understand the experience of the researcher and co-researchers, can perceive a similarly felt experience. This section primarily concentrates around issues of validity in qualitative, phenomenological inquiry, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Polkinghorne (1983).

Validity

Kvale (1996) suggested that in a qualitative study validity is determined by the researcher’s capacity to critically examine all of the existing data concerning participants’ revelatory relationships to the phenomenon of interest. He additionally explained that validity is strengthened through a communicative relationship between the researcher and a research group concerning the validity, or the trustworthiness, of the study and a pragmatic validity, in which the research goes beyond attempts to convince an audience of the legitimacy of the methodological findings but is additionally concerned with the relationship between the findings revealed in the study with actual changes evoked in the world in which the research has relevance. In the case of this study, an interested audience might look like practitioners who would like to integrate therapeutic letter writing into practice with clients but lack confidence and competence within this
particular context of the therapeutic relationship. This study attempted to address each of Kvale’s (1996) recommendations concerning the establishment of validity in qualitative research through the consistent use of a research team during the study and my attempt to represent accurate descriptions of the participants’ expressions that were obtained through the interview process.

In order to establish a valid study, Koch (1994) suggested that the phenomenological researcher must provide evidence of credibility throughout the research process. In the case of this study, credibility takes many forms, such as consulting with a research group to ensure accuracy of interpretations made from participant data and returning to the co-researchers of the study to ensure congruence between researcher-formulated descriptions about participant experience and the co-researcher’s perspectives concerning their own lived experiences.

**Member checks.** Member checks consistently were used during the follow-up interview phases of this project, which is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as the most important criteria for achieving credibility in a qualitative investigation. Member checks facilitated participant involvement by enabling each to share his or her views concerning the accuracy of my analysis of the textural descriptions provided.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) contended that the reliability of a qualitative study is made vulnerable by any imprudent behavior on the part of the researcher during the data collection and data analysis process. In order to ensure the credibility and reliability of this study, I utilized a research group, peer debriefing, and triangulation consistently throughout this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Research team. The research group for the context of this study consisted of the advisory committee for my dissertation, which includes two faculty members in counselor education that are familiar with qualitative design and counseling-related phenomenon and an outside faculty member in educational studies that has extensive knowledge concerning the methodological framework for this study. I have additionally sought counsel from a professional colleague with considerable interest in humanistic psychology and the use of therapeutic letters in the counseling relationship. The research group, along with peer debriefing, supported me in countering difficulties related to subjective bias along with challenges related to the investigation process in general, including data analysis, interpretation, and the implementation of the specific methodological design.

Peer debriefing. Peer debriefing consists of collaboration with a peer with the intent of acquiring feedback regarding the analysis and interpretation of participant data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the completion of the follow-up interviews and interpretive processes of the researcher in conjunction with the research group, the peer debriefing was employed to dialogue concerning the interpretations, to expand the areas of participant description that were out of my awareness, and to talk about any potential researcher blind spots that could have obscured key participant descriptions. This process enabled me to intentionally and informally talk out loud with a peer about the interview process, the interpretive steps to analyzing the transcribed interviews, and experiences with relation to the study, generally and specifically. The peer also assisted me by encouraging me to look at the data from multiple and varied perceptual angles so
as to ensure the most correct object of experience was found within the participants’ experiences as well as in universally, thematic expressions of participant experience as a whole with regard to the phenomenon.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation is employed to enhance the likelihood that the outcomes of a phenomenological study will be conceptualized as credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Multiple participants were used in this study in order to attain triangulation. The sample for this study consists of six participants who each shared in common a revelatory relationship to the phenomenon of interest. Throughout the initial contact with each co-researcher up until the final follow-up interviews, that data obtained from interviews was compared with previous interviews for consistency of findings. Inconsistencies were explored with each participant in order to increase the potential of securing the most accurate descriptions of experience.

**Dependability**

Another important component of determining the validity of a qualitative study is the concept of dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is concerned with how reliable or consistent the results of a study are with the data collected and the extent of the researcher’s objectivity in the study. Through the use of an external auditor to assist me in determining whether or not the interpretations of the study were consistent with the transcribed data obtained from the participants, I took intentional steps to ensure this investigation’s dependability. An external auditor, according to Creswell (1998), is someone that has competence with regard to qualitative research, or in the case of this study, the phenomenological method of analysis and enters the research process after the
data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of the phenomenological data has been completed. The external auditor determined the soundness with which the phenomenological method was employed with regard to the study. The auditor provided constructive feedback, both in written and verbal forms to me, and the recommended changes were considered for integration into the study.

**Audit trail.** In order to establish the reliability of this study, the researcher used an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in order to assist the reader in authenticating the findings of this study. The audit trail enabled the reader to follow the steps taken throughout the investigation to arrive at the themes and descriptions from participant statements that spoke to a universal element of phenomenological experience pertaining to clients’ experiences of humanistically-oriented therapeutic letters during the counseling process. Dey (1993) indicated that the phenomenological researcher has a responsibility to the reader to show them how he or she arrived at the results of the study. The audit trail in this study explained how the data were collected and analyzed, how subsequent thematic clusters were formed, and how interpretive decisions were made throughout the methodological inquiry. I maintained a researcher log, or journal, throughout the research experience, which included personal reflections, questions, and decisions concerning challenges, emerging ideas, and spontaneous shifts encountered during the interviewing, data collection, and analysis stages of the research. This audit trail was an important step in ensuring the reliability of this study and the dependability of the conclusions made concerning participant data.
Credibility

Veracity, or the credibility of this qualitative study, is improved when interpretations of participant data give faithful, identifiable, and true, or accurate, descriptions of experience, such that they resonate truthfully to those who read the articulated descriptions in the context of this phenomenological investigation (Sandelowski, 1994). Caputo (1987) contended, “Everything comes down to our capacity to recognize ourselves in the finished account, in the ‘story’ of human existence which is recounted there” (p. 80). The best interpretations in phenomenological research are those that enable the reader to find a familiar place either through recollection or in the potential that the described experiences are experientially believable.

Throughout this project, I asked myself whether or not the interested readers would be able to conceptualize the rendered participant accounts as a valid portrayal of clients who receive a humanistic letter from their counselor during the therapeutic relationship. Concerning the validity of a descriptive study such as phenomenology, Kvale (1996) suggested that the phenomenological researcher is primarily interested in the pragmatic resonance, meaning, “Does the research lead to any useful understanding?” concerning the phenomenon of interest. The fundamental essence of validity with regard to this study is the extent to which I was able to authentically and truthfully portray the uniquely lived experiences of participants who were in a relationship with the phenomenon of humanistic letter writing during their counseling experiences.

The epoché process is a fundamental method used in the phenomenological design to establish trustworthiness of participant accounts. One tool that I used
throughout the study was a researcher log (Ortlipp, 2008), which is constitutive of researcher reflections concerning thoughts, attitudes, and affective responses that occur during interviews, data analysis, and representation that could potentially impact the analytic relationship between participant data and researcher. The use of the researcher log facilitated reflective practice that served as an internal audit of my processes and subsequent interpretive findings of participant descriptions.

In this phenomenological research, the issue of reliability involved the interpretive appropriateness of participant descriptions. I was faced with the dilemma regarding fit between experience and the rendering through language of such experience. As von Eckartsberg (1998) explained:

How is it that we can say what we experience and yet always live more than we can say, so that we could always say more than we in fact do? How can we evaluate the adequacy or inadequacy of our expression in terms of its doing justice to the full lived quality of the experience described? (p. 15)

The possibility exists in interpretive practice that various phenomenological researchers will render their interpretive stances differently and subsequently arrive at varied meanings of participant experience regarding the phenomenon. For the purposes of this qualitative inquiry through the lens of the phenomenological method, reliability was determined by the capacity for an interested audience in relationship to the phenomenon to find with some comparable accuracy, in their own subjective experience, what was uncovered in the phenomenological rendering of participant experiences. An important strategy used by the researcher to aid readers in determining the extent to
which their own context corresponds with the research situation, and as a consequence, whether or not findings can be transferred or extended into the real world in some meaningful way, is to use rich, thick descriptions (Merriam, 2002) that provide sufficient description that contextualized the study. Rich, thick descriptions in this study aided in supplying the reader with a generous amount of detailed data concerning the phenomenologically expressed experiences of participants.

The conclusions arrived at in this phenomenological research were not definitive truths but instead were viewed as interpretive possibilities that can remain open for continued examination from interested readers (Giorgi, 1970). Giorgi advised that phenomenological reliability is primarily interested in whether or not the reader of the descriptions who tries to temporarily hold the researcher’s viewpoint as expressed by the researcher, can find what the researcher perceived, independent of mutual agreement.

**Nurturing Research Trustworthiness**

Polkinghorne (1983) provided four specific criteria to support interested readers in being able to determine the trustworthiness of the phenomenological rendering of participant experiences: vividness, accuracy, richness, and elegance. A description obtains the quality of vividness through its capacity to attract the reader’s attention and pull him or her in through the presence of a tone of honesty and authenticity of description. The phenomenological descriptions articulated in this study achieved accuracy through believability, such that the interested parties in relationship to the phenomenon were able to distinguish the phenomenal experience, vicariously, from an internal vantage of plausibility. The phenomenological descriptions achieved the third
quality, richness, by obtaining sufficient aesthetic depth in regards to the composition of
the phenomenological depiction, enabling the interested audience to immerse themselves
seamlessly, affectively and cognitively, in the experience.

The final point Polkinghorne (1983) described is the characteristic of elegance. Elegance in this phenomenological research was primarily concerned with the
explanative breadth employed by the researcher and the manner in which the
phenomenological experiences were brought together and subsequently portrayed. This
study achieved elegance through addressing the question: Is the description expressed in
such a way that it leaves an indelible impression in the reader’s consciousness?
Achieving trustworthiness through the context of Polkinghorne’s (1983) model extended
a challenge to extend the phenomenological experience of participants to interested
readers in such a way that the reader would be able to appreciate the phenomenological
experience in a genuine and comprehensive way.

The next step, agreement, is similar to Polkinghorne’s (1983) criteria of accuracy,
wherein the interested reader of the phenomenologically expressed experience of
humanistic letter writing in counseling, is capable of viewing the researcher’s
interpretation as the researcher views it which is made possible through researcher
transparency regarding his or her decision trail (Sandelowski, 1986). For the purposes of
this research, I worked closely with a research group to ensure that all members were in
agreement concerning the interpretations made from the analysis of participant
descriptions concerning their relationship to the phenomenon.
The final step is potential, or the capacity for the interpretations to be expanded into the consciousness of interested readers with regard to the phenomenon of letter writing in clients’ experiences during counseling. Some of the tentative interests for this study were to expand the literature concerning client experiences of humanistic letter writing in counseling via the narratives of participants in a revelatory relationship to the phenomenon as well as to enable the findings to support the practical use of humanistic letters in counseling practice.

In conclusion, the most powerful test of trustworthiness in phenomenological research is its potential to entice the interested reader into the co-researchers’ experiences, enabling the audience to experience their own worlds and the worlds of others in a novel and more enhanced way.

**Summary**

The phenomenological method was used for this research process in order to investigate the essences and structures of participant’s phenomenological experiences with receiving a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter from their counselor while in a counseling relationship. The primary focus was on the essence of the meaning of the interaction between the phenomenon of humanistic letter writing in counseling and the phenomenological experience as it is lived by each of the participants in this study. Phenomenological research applications gave me strategies with which to approach a qualitative investigation of lived experience such as bracketing assumptions and prejudices, reducing phenomenon by continuously returning to the essence of experience in order to obtain the inner composition of the phenomenon itself, horizontalizing the
transcribed data by viewing everything revealed by participants with equal importance, clustering the data into universal groups or themes, and co-constructing collaboratively with the participants in the study along with a research team to create an accurate combination of textural and structural descriptions with emphasis on the “what” and “how” of the phenomenological experience.

The following chapter reports the findings of this current study and attempts to emphasize the responses of both individual participants as well as those that can be generalized in relationship to those experiences shared by the participants, collectively with relationship to the phenomenon of clients’ experiences of therapeutic letters from their counselors between counseling sessions that were written by their counselor from a humanistic expression of relatedness. Interpretations of participant data, including rich descriptions and universal themes with relationship to the phenomenological experience, are explained. Implications of findings additionally are discussed.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

“... until I see it written down ... only would I feel what you might think of me ...” (Charlotte).

The previous chapter described the methodological research process employed for the purposes of this investigation. As researcher, I utilized an across-participant phenomenological approach in order to analyze the data to describe the essence of participants’ experiences of receiving a humanistically-oriented counseling letter from their therapist between counseling sessions. This section describes the research outcomes concerning this investigation of participants’ perceptions regarding the experience of receiving a counseling letter in the mail from their therapist and is demarcated into three primary sections. The initial section presents the six participants to the reader, including demographic information and a brief summary of each participant’s experience of receiving a therapeutic letter from his or her counselor. This chapter presents a thorough reporting of the data used for this research, including verbatim illustrative examples from the interviews. The final section provides a detailed rendering of the research outcomes concerning the experiences of clients who received a therapeutic letter from their counselor between counseling sessions.

Participants

The sample of individuals comprising this investigation included six adult women between the ages of 21 and 53. All six participants described themselves as either “White” or Caucasian. All six participants met the aforementioned criteria for this
research, that is, all participants were currently engaged in therapy, above the age of 18, and did not have any significant mental health symptoms that might have interfered in their ability to receive a counseling letter and discuss that experience with the researcher. It should be noted that each participant was provided with the opportunity to choose a pseudonym in place of using their actual name in this study. Four of the six participants asked that their first names be used in the study, and two of the participants selected a pseudonym. This section introduces the reader to each of these participants.

Nikki

Nikki is a 24-year-old Caucasian woman. She is currently engaged to her boyfriend of two years and has two small children from a previous relationship. Nikki described herself as a “stay-at-home mother.” She lives in a small rural community in northeastern Ohio and commutes several miles to her therapy appointments via public transportation. Nikki noted previous experiences of being in counseling and explained to the researcher that she was interested in participating in this study because she “thought it could help.” She stated, “I’ve always enjoyed getting letters in the mail . . . I don’t get them very often.” Nikki discussed the importance of writing in her own personal life, saying that she writes poetry and stories. Nikki had met with her therapist at a local community mental health agency for three sessions before receiving her initial counseling letter. Her goals for counseling were to increase self-esteem, to improve her feelings about herself as a mother, and to deal with past experiences that continue to impact present functioning. Nikki also stated that she has “struggled with depression for a very long time.”
Nikki was the first participant interviewed in this study. The researcher initially contacted Nikki at a small café located near her residence. The formal research interview and follow-up interviews took place in a confidential office at the community agency where she receives therapeutic services. Nikki reported that she was “a little sick” during the first interview and described feeling “anxious . . . and nervous” about the process due to “not knowing what to expect.” Over the course of the first interview, Nikki appeared to become more comfortable with the interview process and described feeling “good” about being able to talk about her experience with someone in addition to her therapist. Nikki explained that participating in this research process was both “informative” and “enjoyable” and thanked the researcher for his time.

**Linda**

Linda is a 51-year-old Caucasian female who lives with her adult daughter in a medium-sized community located in northeastern Ohio. She reported that she has been divorced for several years and is currently not in a relationship. Linda indicated that she lives with her adult daughter and described a “close” relationship with her. Linda has worked as a cashier at a local grocery store for several years and is currently working full-time. Linda had met with her therapist at a local community mental health agency for four sessions before receiving a counseling letter between sessions. Linda described her counselor as being “very nice” and “like a son figure” in her life, saying that she is “comfortable” to talk to him about her concerns.

The researcher initially met with Linda at a small restaurant near her place of residence. Linda provided verbal and written consent to participate in this research. The
first formal interview and follow-up interview were conducted in a confidential office located at the mental health agency where she is currently receiving therapeutic services. Linda told the researcher that she had been feeling “nervous” about the interview process, stating, “I just don’t know what to expect exactly.” Toward the end of the interview experience, Linda described feeling “good . . . and comfortable” about the process. Linda related difficulties with unresolved grief concerning the recent loss of her father as well as the loss of her brother several years previously. Linda added that she went to counseling to address an increase in depression and prolonged difficulties with self-esteem.

**Cassie**

Cassie is a 21-year-old married White female who lives in a small, rural community in northeastern Ohio. She has one biological child and three stepchildren. She recently began receiving counseling services at a community mental health agency due to an increase in feelings of depression and self-esteem issues relative to her experience of being a mother. Cassie described a difficult upbringing due to poor experiences with her parents and stated that her goals for counseling were to feel more positively about herself and to improve her mothering skills, to explore past issues regarding family of origin, and to manage her depression more effectively.

Cassie had met with her therapist on three occasions before receiving the counseling letter in the mail. The initial appointment to meet about the research experience was cancelled due to transportation issues. I contacted Cassie over the phone and discussed the research process. Cassie provided verbal consent over the phone after
she had received the informed consent paperwork and demographic form through the mail. Cassie brought the paperwork to her initial research interview and provided this to me at that time. Cassie told me that she was interested in participating in the study because she thought that the idea of getting a letter from her counselor in the mail seemed “cool,” and she thought it could potentially help her with her goals for counseling. We met for both interviews in a confidential study room located at the community library in the area in which Cassie resides. Cassie was pleasant and cooperative throughout the interview process and stated, “I got a lot out of being a part of this study.”

**Megan**

Megan is a 53-year-old White female who lives in a large urban area located in northeastern Ohio. She reported she has been a language arts teacher in a high school setting for 24 years. She revealed that she will be retiring in the upcoming year and reported being excited about this. Megan noted that she has been in a committed relationship with her partner for over three years but reports relationship conflict as a primary source of depression in her life. She explained that she is in counseling to “figure out” the impact of this relationship on her life. Megan is a religious person and enjoys being able to provide meaningful service to the community in which she resides. Megan has a child from a previous marriage.

Megan reported she has been receiving therapeutic services from her counselor for over a year at a local private practice counseling setting. She explained that the counseling initially began as couples therapy but over time transitioned into individual therapy for both her and her partner.
I initially met with Megan at a local restaurant in the community in which Megan lives in order to discuss the research experience and obtain informed consent. Megan provided verbal and written consent to participate and told me at that time, “I do not want you to give me the money. I am just really interested in helping you with this research and in seeing what I can learn from getting a letter from my counselor.” Megan described her interest for participating in this study as being a desire to help, an interest in how receiving a counseling letter from her therapist could support her with her goals for counseling, and a “curiosity” about the process in general. The initial research interview took place at a confidential study room at a community library in the city which Megan resides. The follow-up interview was conducted over the phone due to scheduling conflicts. Megan was cooperative and pleasant throughout the researcher-participant contact.

**Charlotte**

Charlotte is a 48-year-old White female who lives in a large urban community located in northeastern Ohio. She explained that she has been divorced for two years and has three daughters. She indicated that all three of her daughters currently live at home but explained that two of them will be moving out of the residence over the next year. She described “very close” relationships with her children. Charlotte works as a chemist at a large paint manufacturing facility and reported that she “really enjoys” what she does for a living. Charlotte has many activities that she enjoys, including scrapbooking and spending time with her daughters. She reported that she is in the process of moving residences to another location within the community in which she lives and is excited for
this “new beginning” in her life. Charlotte has been in counseling at a private practice setting with her therapist for the past three years, stating that she was initially “dragged into it” by her husband for couples counseling. Charlotte explained that over time, she and her husband chose to get a divorce, and over the past year and a half, Charlotte has been meeting with her counselor on an individual basis.

I made initial contact with Charlotte at a restaurant located in the community in which Charlotte resides. Charlotte provided written and verbal consent to participate in the study at that time. Charlotte chose to participate in this research because she was “interested” in how receiving a counseling letter could help her with her goals for counseling. Charlotte also reported that she has “always enjoyed” writing letters to people in her life and was intrigued at the idea of receiving a letter from her therapist. Both interviews were conducted in a study room at the local public library in Charlotte’s community. Charlotte was pleasant and cooperative throughout the research experience.

Lisa

Lisa is a 48-year-old White female who lives in a large urban community in northeastern Ohio. She reported she has three children, two of whom are currently away attending college. Lisa has a daughter in high school who lives at home. Lisa travels often to visit her sons who play college athletics at their respective universities. Lisa works full time in sales and management for a local beverage company and travels “a lot” for work obligations. Lisa reported she has been married for over 20 years but noted distance in her marriage relationship. Lisa said that she has been meeting with her therapist for over a year in a private practice setting. Lisa explained that she entered into
therapy to “gain more insight” into herself and to “better understand” the problems and issues she is dealing with in her life at this time relative to her marriage relationship and guilty feelings for wanting a divorce.

I made initial contact with Lisa at a restaurant located near Lisa’s place of employment. Lisa provided verbal and written consent for this research experience at that time. Lisa agreed to participate in the study due to an interest in “psychology.” Lisa stated that she “always wanted to be a psychologist” but was not able to due to having children at a young age. Lisa was “excited” about getting a letter from her counselor and was interested in “helping” with this study. The initial interview was conducted in a confidential reading room at the community library in the city Lisa resides in. The follow-up interview was conducted over the phone due to scheduling conflicts and Lisa being out of town visiting family. Lisa was cooperative throughout the researcher-participant relationship.

**Summary of Participants**

All participants in this study provided detailed and descriptive responses relative to their experience of receiving a counseling letter from their therapist between sessions. The distinctiveness of each participant’s experience was also understood in light of the commonalities shared by other participants, giving way to emergent themes that were more alike than different. The data analysis processes incorporated participants’ verbatim responses to create shared themes across participant experience. Unique aspects of participants’ experiences that were not shared by the group as a whole were also noted and discussed in a later section. The next section outlines the data analysis process
utilized to develop the emergent themes relative to this study and contains examples taken from the data analysis.

**Verification of Counseling Letters According to Humanistic Criteria**

For the purposes of this study, the researcher assisted both counselors in creating therapeutic letters that contained at least two stylistic features from the humanistic guidelines explained in Chapter 1. The counselors made original drafts of the counseling letters and then contacted me to discuss the letters and seek supervision for the purposes of this study. I provided feedback about the letters and, in most cases, recommended some changes to each of the six letters used in this study. I attempted to respect the counselor’s personhood and tone in the composition of the letters but encouraged adherence to at least three components listed in the humanistic guidelines provided to each counselor before composing the letters to clients. If the letter contained at least three humanistic criteria, than it was considered to be humanistic in nature and was then mailed to the client. Copies of each letter were retained by the counselor to provide to me as well as to include in the client file for record-keeping purposes. These letters can be found in Appendix T. I include three examples of humanistic criteria that were found in Tiffany’s letter to Megan.

The first was identified at the beginning of the letter, where Tiffany used appropriate transparency to let Megan know how she had been thinking and feeling about Megan and her accompanying concerns being discussed in counseling.

I think about you often and feel very thankful that we have had the opportunity to work together. I often leave our session feeling that you have offered me insight
and wisdom. I always find it remarkable . . . your ability to self-assess and find another layer of self to reflect upon.

In this example, Tiffany was attempting to reveal to Megan her thoughts about the work they were doing together but also attempted to communicate to Megan about a strength she was noticing in her with respect to her willingness to understand herself, which Tiffany viewed as a “remarkable” quality. This was highlighted as meeting one of the stylistic features of a humanistic letter.

Another example in Tiffany’s letter to Megan was her attempt to communicate advanced empathy in order to support Megan with being able to step more deeply into herself about a particular area of challenge.

In most situations, I observe you as keenly knowing what to do and simply digging in and finding a way to help without asking for much in return. However with [your partner], I wonder if it feels uniquely difficult at times, here you cannot simply dig in and help . . . as many things are his own struggles.

Tiffany attempted to communicate to Megan in a way that acknowledged deeper undertones of her experience of struggling about a particular area of experience in which Megan had been suffering but had not previously discussed at length with her counselor. This portion of the letter was additionally humanistic in nature according to the guidelines identified for this investigation.

A third humanistic component found in the letter was Tiffany’s attempt to comment on inner tensions she noticed in Megan’s experience. “I wonder what it would be like if you and I talked about how your life can be unique and not normal, yet, exactly
what ‘should have happened and did happen’ for Megan.” In this portion of the letter, Tiffany was trying to support Megan in considering the tension she notices in her life due to wanting a life that feels “more normal,” yet simultaneously desiring to retain her uniqueness as a person.

The examples provided here were typical of the kinds of comments written in the letters. The above described process was used with both of the counselors in this study regarding the construction of the letters provided to each of the clients. The letters were then mailed to each of the participants, and I made contact with each participant to arrange the initial research interview to discuss the experience of receiving a counseling letter.

**Research Process and Analysis of Data**

The purpose of this investigation was to discover how six people enrolled in counseling services described and understood their experience of receiving a humanistically-oriented counseling letter from their therapist between counseling sessions. In order to capture these experiences, each participant engaged in two semi-structured interviews with the researcher and responded to the primary question, “What was your experience of receiving a counseling letter from your therapist between sessions?” Participant responses to this question along with additional questions aimed at enabling the researcher to approximate, as much as possible, the experience of each participant, comprised of the data that was utilized by the researcher for analysis. From this fundamental question, textural and structural descriptions were discovered that revealed what participants shared with each other regarding their experience of receiving
a counseling letter. These descriptions were then categorized into universal themes shared by the majority of participants that captured the essence of their experience of the phenomenon. In addition, unique participant expressions that were not universal were also considered and included in the outcomes noted below.

**Data Analysis Protocol**

This research utilized Van Kaam (1959) and Moustakas’ (1994) steps to inform the phenomenological process for this research. These steps were discussed in the previous chapter (see Appendix M for outline of methodological process). For a detailed outline of the precise analysis process utilized for this research, please reference Appendix U.

Within a week after the initial research interview was completed, a verbatim transcription of the digitally recorded interview with each participant was completed. A textual summary was also created. In order to construct the textual summary, I completed a close reading of each transcription several times. Verbatim statements were listed along with their corresponding meaning units. Table 1 provides an example of the process used.

This process enabled me to compose a textural description for each participant. The transcription along with its analogous individual textural summary was mailed to each participant in order to have the data verified for accuracy. I conducted a follow-up interview with each participant in order to discuss the accuracy of the data and integrated any modifications suggested by the participants.
**Table 1**

*Illustration of Researcher Process to Analyze Participant Transcriptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbatim Textual Statements</th>
<th>Relevant Units of Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>How could somebody write something so nice . . . nobody ever said any positive stuff to me in my life . . . the letter was very positive . . .</td>
<td>Nobody ever says anything positive to me. The letter was very positive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The letter was so to the point . . . he was really like to the point in the letter . . . he was right to the point . . . very right to the point . . . or honest . . . or honest, or like to the point . . .</td>
<td>Affirmation is important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I re-read the letter four times . . . I re-read it and re-read it . . . the last time I read it . . . I re-read it four times . . . I read it on different days . . .</td>
<td>The letter was to the point and honest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>. . . if he wasn’t my counselor, I could still talk to him . . . he’s nice . . . he’s very nice . . .</td>
<td>Importance of honesty that is positive in nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I just pretty much thought that he would write that, okay, Linda goes to counseling and this is what we went over and this is what she still needs to do . . .</td>
<td>I re-read the letter on different days and on four different occasions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most surprising . . . I think would be like the self-esteem . . .</td>
<td>The letter helped me feel like I could talk to my counselor even after he is no longer my counselor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I guess it showed me I have come a long way . . . but I don’t feel like I have . . . seeing how far I’ve come . . . to a point . . .</td>
<td>My counselor is very nice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I had assumptions about what my counselor would write to me about in the letter. I didn’t think my counselor would write about positive aspects about me as a person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I was surprised that my counselor wrote about my self-esteem in the letter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The letter helps me to see how far I have come in counseling so far.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Throughout the process of re-describing these meaning units, I employed epoché in order to set aside any prejudgment and biases that might influence how the data were viewed and understood. A peer reviewer assisted in becoming aware of biases that interfered with understanding participant viewpoints (see Appendix N). Phenomenological reduction was utilized faithfully over the course of reading and re-reading the transcripts. The researcher’s task was to see the descriptions provided by participants as they appeared in their actual form and not in an interpretive fashion. The various perspectives of participants as a whole were formulated into a composite structure regarding their experience of receiving a counseling letter between counseling sessions. This process is outlined below.

**Listing and Preliminary Grouping**

The initial step of the analytic process was to obtain a preliminary grouping of verbatim textual responses from the participants that resulted in the creation of meaning units. A list of verbatim expressions that were relevant for understanding the experience of receiving a counseling letter was created for each participant. This list was revised and reduced to its invariant constituents (non-repetitive and nonoverlapping qualities) by considering whether each expression was necessary for understanding the experience and whether the expressed could be labeled by the researcher. This process is also described as horizontal mapping (Creswell, 1998). The statements used in this process were the exact words of each participant’s experience of receiving a counseling letter. Over 70 descriptive statements, or horizons of experience, by the participants, collectively, were identified that were not identical in expression. These horizons were later collapsed over
the course of the analysis, and thematic categories were discovered. Table 2 provides an example of some of these horizons that were identified.

**Table 2**

*Identification and Listing of Horizons of Participants’ Experiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbatim Horizons of Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>I guess it showed me that he genuinely cares about what I have to say and that it’s not just a job to him. It makes me want to trust him more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>It was nice to re-read that part. It really stuck out to me, cause I put myself down a lot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>I read the whole thing over . . . I just looked at it. I had to sit there and think . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>The first time I read it, I think I was like not quite sure I was reading what I was reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>The letter added a level of understanding that wasn’t there as much before.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>I’ll probably keep it for a long time because it made me feel good about myself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Determination of Meaning Units**

The next step of the analysis was to test each participant expression for two primary criteria: (a) Does it hold some aspect of the experience that is essential for understanding it? and (b) Can the expression be condensed and categorized? Expressions that were not able to meet these requirements were removed. Expressions that were redundant or unclear were either portrayed in more descriptive ways or were also removed. The remaining expressions became the invariant constituents, or fundamental descriptive aspects of the participants’ experiences that were used to determine whether
or not they were shared by a majority of the participants. See Table 3 for an example of this process.

Table 3

Relevant Units of Meaning: Participants Experience Positive Feelings and Thoughts as a Result of Reading the Counseling Letter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbatim Textual Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>It made me feel really happy . . . like really good inside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>It picked up my spirit . . . it made me feel more hope.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>The letter made me feel good . . . it makes me feel like maybe I am doing something right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>I felt happy reading it. It felt nice to get something so positive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>It was touching. It made me feel happy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>It made me feel good inside. It got to my heart.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I carried out this process by returning to the preliminary groupings containing participant viewpoints that were obtained from the initial analysis. This process enabled me to make a decision about which horizons, or invariant constituents, contained salient features of the participant’s experience. Then each expression was held up to the criterion listed above and made a determination about its appropriateness for inclusion as a theme of experience.

Clustering and Thematizing the Horizons

During this step of the analysis, the meaning units, or invariant constituents of the experience, were grouped or clustered. These clusters were then associated with a
specific thematic category. These clustered or grouped meaning units comprised the fundamental or essential themes of the experience.

In order to complete this step, I utilized the meaning units, or significant viewpoints provided by each participant regarding their experience of the counseling letter. The purpose of this task was to detect and classify unique and essential themes that comprised, descriptively, each participant’s experience of the phenomenon. These are reported later in this chapter.

To determine the categories of core themes that characterized the participants’ shared experience of the phenomenon of interest, participant viewpoints were identified by examining the meaning units found in the transcribed interviews and determining whether or not these experiences reoccurred across each participant’s experience. These expressed viewpoints were listed and placed into categories in order to keep track of each participant’s specific themes. Table 4 provides an example of this categorization of participant viewpoints with their corresponding invariant constituents.

A wide and varied spectrum of emotional and cognitive response was noted with relation to client-participant feelings and thoughts about self while reading or reflecting about the letter. Each of these participant expressions were grouped in the form of a table that contained all of the relevant descriptions. Redundant responses were noted as well as those responses that were not shared by the majority of participants. These horizons were then collapsed into a textural descriptive category that represented the universal elements of participant experience of the letter with relation to the feelings and thoughts expressed collectively by the group as a whole. Table 5 illustrates the above described process.
Table 4

_Categorization of Invariant Constituents of Clients’ Experiences of the Counseling Letter_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Relevant Units of Meaning</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>It made me feel happier than I had been before.</td>
<td>Increase in positive feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>It was all positive. I saw that I am really not that dumb or stupid.</td>
<td>Letter was a positive experience that contributed to improved perception of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>The letter made me feel happy . . . because I put myself down a lot.</td>
<td>Contributed to positive feelings and aided client in not putting self down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>It helped me to a point where I needed to cry.</td>
<td>Letter aided the client with expression of feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>It was an awakening, you know, to my feelings.</td>
<td>Letter supported client in recognizing her feelings more clearly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>It makes me feel a lot better than I did . . . about myself. I don’t think of myself as</td>
<td>Letter aided client with improved perception of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a unique person. I just take myself for granted.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

*Shared Feelings and Thoughts About the Self Clients Attributed to Letter*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Nikki</th>
<th>Charlotte</th>
<th>Cassie</th>
<th>Linda</th>
<th>Lisa</th>
<th>Megan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy/glad</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It felt nice”</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved feelings about self</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive experience</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New perspective about self not previously considered/believed</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of feelings</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprise/shock/amazed</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling understood</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling good “inside”</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembering “I’m a person”</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling touched (heart)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My counselor doesn’t judge me</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nervous/scared</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased confidence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cried</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopeful</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful feelings</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt cool</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uplifting</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Textural and Structural Descriptions**

Next, I analyzed the categories of invariant constituents and composed individual textural descriptions concerning what was experienced by each participant (see Appendix O), followed by structural descriptions that focused on how participants experienced the phenomenon (see Appendix P). I utilized imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994) in order to explore possible meanings and to consider the phenomenon from different
perspectives by imagining how different structural qualities could impact the textual qualities. One example of imaginative variation was to vary the geographical location in which each participant received counseling services. I determined that the viewpoints of participants would not have been significantly altered if geographical contexts were altered.

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, a member check was completed with each participant. Each participant was provided with a copy of the textural and structural narratives and was asked to verify the accuracy of the descriptions. Any information provided by the participants that was additive or corrective was integrated into the textural and structural descriptions. Megan and Nikki asked for slight modifications. The descriptions were revised in order to reflect these changes.

A composite textural and structural description was developed that summated the viewpoints of the participants, collectively (see Appendices Q & R). These composite narratives focused on the shared aspects of group experience with respect to the phenomenon. This portion of the analysis was concluded with a composite textural-structural synthesis that portrayed the shared aspects of participant perceptions pertaining to the “what” and “how” of their experience (see Appendix S). The textural-structural synthesis incorporated the themes and invariant constituents that were expressed by the majority of participants. This description aided in identifying core themes containing the essential essences of those perceptions that were shared by participants related to the experience of a counseling letter from their therapist.
Summative Synthesis and Identification of Core Themes

In the next step, I completed a thorough review of the meaning units associated with each of individual participant viewpoints in conjunction with the textural and structural descriptions that were created through the above described steps. I compiled an exhaustive list of the various viewpoints expressed by the six participants in this study containing common aspects of participant experience. This list of participant perspectives was thoroughly examined with the assistance of a peer reviewer and professional colleague. If a particular viewpoint could be linked to the perspectives of four or more participants, it was categorized as a core theme. Redundancy of several invariant constituents was apparent among core themes (e.g., happiness, anxious feelings, surprise, client reflectiveness, and impact on self and others). During this stage of the phenomenological analysis, it was essential to make a decision about which themes seemed most explanatory and descriptive for the participants, collectively. Core themes were reviewed during subsequent stages of the reduction process in order to compose the structural and textural narratives for each participant and as a group.

Through constant comparison of quotes and ideas, I was able to build, through language, the themes that portrayed the summative perspective of the whole group. This activity aided in identifying five core themes shared across participant experience. The general synthesis provided a written account of the fundamental features constitutive of the participants’ shared experience of receiving a counseling letter from their respective therapist between counseling appointments.
The outcomes for this current inquiry suggested that for the six female individuals who received a humanistically-oriented counseling letter, a synthesis containing their perspectives regarding their experience was composed of five core themes: (a) Ability to re-read counselor communications in letter form increases client reflectiveness, is more “catch-able,” and is viewed as meaningful; (b) The letter had a positive impact on client experiences of the counselor and the counseling relationship; (c) Obtaining counselor perceptions of the client in a letter was noted as surprising and evoked new feelings and thoughts about the self; (d) Letter was viewed as gift-like and preservable for future use; and (e) Desire to share the letter with close others in order to be understood. These themes containing the corresponding participant descriptions are provided below. The themes are discussed in greater detail in the concluding chapter of this research.

Research Findings: Synthesis

Core Theme 1: Ability to Re-Read Counselor Communications in Letter Form Increases Client Reflectiveness, is More “Catch-able,” and is Viewed as Meaningful

I reflected back on my life through this letter . . . you sit and you think about your life . . . there’s more to me . . . it lets me reflect . . . it gave me a lot to think about . . . (Megan)

Just the way anybody could say, ‘Oh, you know, You’re not dumb, you’re smart.’ You know, they’re just saying it to, um please me . . . but to see it written down, to me, right now, it felt more meaningful. (Charlotte)

The theme of the ability to re-read the counseling letter and increased client reflectiveness was a significant perception marked across client experience. Table 6 provides verbatim participant statements that are illustrative of the structural constituents that embody this core theme.
Table 6

**Core Theme 1: Ability to Re-Read Counselor Communications in Letter Form Increases Client Reflectiveness, is More “Catch-Able”, and is Viewed as Meaningful**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbatim Textual Statements</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>I read it through the first time, and then I read it through two more times slower, to make sure I didn’t skip over bits at all. I find something new in it that maybe I didn’t catch before.</td>
<td>Re-reading letter led to discovery of new information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>When she said that in the letter, I thought, ‘Wow!’ I looked back that I am really not that stupid. I had to sit back and think about it and say, ‘Why does she see me that way?’</td>
<td>The letter encourages the client to reflect about herself and her counselor’s perception of her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>He tells me I’m a good mom a lot, but I have a hard time remembering, just getting it. I don’t know, having it there in front of me, you know to hold, like to read it over again, I could see it. When I’m told stuff, I’m like, ‘Oh yeah, right.’ Especially in a moment when you are real depressed or down or something like that, you’re like, ‘You know what, I’m not any of those nice things you are saying.’</td>
<td>Being able to hold and read the letter can help the client see her counselor’s feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>I re-read the letter four times. I re-read it and re-read it . . . each time I read it, I cried . . . the last time I read it, I cried. I asked myself, ‘Why am I crying?’ . . I read it on different days.</td>
<td>Re-reading letter was marked as important and led client to reflect about herself more deeply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>I actually read it a couple of times. I just wanted to re-read it again to make sure I didn’t miss anything . . . It definitely helped me to think about my struggles and the things I am going through a little more than I might, you know, like I typically do, um, like if I didn’t have the letter.</td>
<td>Re-reading the letter supports the client in thinking about her life more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Re-reading it a couple of times, I thought back, ‘I’m not sure that I have expressed my feelings about it to her. I just maybe haven’t gone into detail about how I feel about that. So I need to set her straight on that. I need her to understand this part of me. You know, I’m not always unique and need to be cherished because there is this bad side of me. I need to open this part up now.</td>
<td>Re-reading letter aids client in thinking back about her counseling experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Core Theme 2: The Letter had a Positive Impact on Client Experiences of the Counselor and the Counseling Relationship

I actually felt like he cared . . . the letter was like telling me, “He’s just here in my mind to help me.” (Linda)

The theme of experiencing feelings of counselor caring and understanding in the counseling relationship appeared to support the clients’ desires to be increasingly open with their therapist in future sessions. Table 7 contains examples of participant statements that exemplify the essences that constitute this core theme.

Core Theme 3: Obtaining Counselor Perception of Client in Letter was Noted as Surprising and Evoked New Feelings and Thoughts About the Self

I was just anxious to see what he wrote in the letter. I’m not even sure what I expected it to say, but I didn’t really expect him to say stuff about me being a good mother . . . or things that would make me feel good about myself . . . so it was just surprising. (Cassie)

The theme of feeling surprised at the positive nature of the letter was reflective of clients describing fears that the counselor would confirm in the letter the negative view the clients already held about themselves and/or their concerns. Table 8 illustrates multiple examples of participant viewpoints that share characteristic features of the above described core theme.
### Table 7

**Core Theme 2: The Letter had a Positive Impact on Client Experiences of the Counselor and the Counseling Relationship**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbatim Textual Statements</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>We are more just trying to get into getting comfortable with each other right now. I think it kind of draws me closer to him. Receiving the letter almost makes him feel more like a friend, than just like my counselor . . . he’s more of a friend that I can confide in, rather than just someone who is getting paid to talk to me.</td>
<td>Feeling closer to counselor and viewing the counselor as being like a friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>It felt very good . . . almost like we’re friends. I’m relaxed where it’s like talking as friends. I don’t feel like a patient. I just go in there. I don’t feel uncomfortable, where it is like, okay, doctor-patient thing, in and out, that’s it . . . it’s much more, it’s like friendship, like a friend I haven’t seen in a long time.</td>
<td>Letter helps client view counseling relationship as being friend-like and aids client in feeling more relaxed when talking about concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>I just sometimes, I think he wasn’t really listening or if I was just another person that was just like, ‘Let’s get her out of here.’ Getting the letter helped me see that he does listen, that I’m not just another person.</td>
<td>Letter helps client consider that her counselor does listen to her and that she is not just another person to her counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>The last time I read the letter, I thought, he is somebody that I can really relate to and feel more connected to. I really think I could tell him more, and he wouldn’t judge me. It makes everything okay to tell him. I finally realized, ‘He’s here to help me. He’s not here to make me feel like a crazy. I don’t need to lie.’</td>
<td>The letter helps the client to feel more connected to the counselor and confirms client view that counselor will not judge her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>She totally, totally gets what I am talking about . . . no misunderstandings . . . she gets how I am feeling. Wow! She gets me! It is nice to be understood. It added a level of understanding . . . there’s one person out there that gets me.</td>
<td>Experience of feeling understood by counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>I get a friendship aspect out of this letter . . . It made me feel like she was a counselor, a person, who is really concerned with me.</td>
<td>Viewing the person of the counselor and degree of concern and caring counselor has for the client</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8

Core Theme 3: Obtaining Counselor Perception of Client in Letter was Noted as Surprising and Evoked New Feelings and Thoughts About the Self

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbatim Textual Statements</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>I was interested to see what he would write. I wasn’t sure what he was going to say. I was really surprised . . . when he told me I was a good mom, it made me feel happier.</td>
<td>Unsure feelings about how counselor saw the client replaced with happy feelings when counselor revealed positive view about his or her perception of client</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>I don’t think anybody sees me as being intelligent. It took me by surprise. I thought for sure she was going to write more about what I need to work on. I guess you could say, negative things. I was expecting I guess negativeness, and I didn’t get any of it. This isn’t what I expected.</td>
<td>Surprising feelings to find out counselor’s positive perception of client; expectation of negative counselor feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>He talked about me being a good mom. That was kind of surprising to me cause I always feel like I’m gonna be like my parents were. I want to be 120% opposite of what I went through. I don’t see that I’m a good mom. So it just kind of stuck out to me when he said that . . . it helped me think about how I could feel it more.</td>
<td>Client reports surprising feelings about counselor’s perception of her as a mother. Aids client in seeing good qualities about self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>I was amazed at actually what he wrote. I didn’t think he would write that. It was surprising to find positive things. The first time I read it, I think I was like not quite sure I was reading what I was reading.</td>
<td>Feeling of surprise due to positive nature of letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>I didn’t exactly know what she would say in it. I mean I had ideas . . . it was nice to know that I am not nuts.</td>
<td>Unsure about what counselor would write; letter can disconfirm negative belief about self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>I was hoping she would have good things to say. I didn’t know what she was going to say. I didn’t know what to expect. I didn’t know if she was going to talk about our sessions together or me as a person, or that I’m crazy. I was excited and yet nervous cause I really didn’t know what she was going to say at all. I didn’t know how she perceives me.</td>
<td>Not knowing how counselor sees the client produces nervous feelings about receiving a letter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Core Theme 4: The Letter is Viewed as Gift-Like and Preservable for Future Use

I don’t get letters very often . . . so I was really excited. I was like, “Look, I got a letter from my counselor!” (Nikki)

The theme of the letter as being gift-like in nature and preservable for future use points to the significance as noted in client experience of having something that could be retained to serve as a reminder for the counseling experience. Table 9 contains examples of participant expressions that demonstrate the essential features of this core theme.

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbatim Textual Statements</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>It feels somewhat like a treat . . . I don’t get letters very often. It was kind of like opening a gift.</td>
<td>Getting a letter from counselor was like a gift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>I’m going to save the letter. I will probably reflect on it a couple of times in my life to see how she sees me and that. I will probably keep it for quite some time if not forever.</td>
<td>The letter can be kept forever and referenced over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>It was really nice to get something in the mail that wasn’t a bill . . . it was very positive.</td>
<td>Experience of getting something in the mail is significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>I could go back and read it, even though I am done with my counselor now because he had to move on.</td>
<td>The letter can be referenced after the counseling relationship has ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>It’s one of those things that I’ll keep and if I’m feeling down, I’ll read it and I’ll be like, ‘I’m on a journey . . . there are people who are helping me.’ It will be interesting to look back at this . . . It’s something I could show my kids, you know when they are older . . .</td>
<td>The letter can remind client of the work that was done in counseling and can be shared with others in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>I’ll probably keep it for a long time cause it made me feel good about myself.</td>
<td>Desire to keep letter for indefinite amount of time due to positive feelings it produced in client</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Core Theme 5: Desire to Share the Letter With Close Others in Order to be Understood

I let my husband read it . . . it helped him to try to be a little better of a husband . . . he was able to see a little bit more of me, of what I have been trying to tell him. It helped him want to see me and what I am going through, like with my problems. (Cassie)

The theme of wanting to share the counseling letter with close others was prevalent for five of the six participants. Table 10 includes five examples of participant descriptions concerning their experience of sharing the letter with a significant person in their lives outside of counseling.

Summary of Core Themes

The above section provided examples of participant statements with respect to their shared experiences of the phenomenon of receiving a counseling letter from their therapist between counseling appointments. These themes derived from this examination suggest that there is a common essential experience relative to a counseling letter that is mailed to clients between sessions. In the following section, examples of supplementary viewpoints are provided by participants that were not shared by the majority of the participants in this study.

Unique Viewpoints

In addition to the core themes of experience shared by the majority of participants, there were also viewpoints held by participants that were either singular or shared by only two participants. Although these could not be categorized as a core theme, they were considered noteworthy and are discussed in the concluding chapter. Table 11 provides a list of some of these unique expressions.
Table 10

*Core Theme 5: Desire to Share the Letter With Close Others in Order to be Understood*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbatim Textual Statements</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>The first thing I did with it is I showed it to my fiancé and said, ‘Look, look I got a letter!’ I was excited . . . Yeah! I wanted to share my excitement about the letter with the person closest to me . . . it was cool.</td>
<td>Exciting to share the letter with a close other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>I asked my daughter, ‘Do you want to read the letter? Well, it’s about me, don’t you want to hear what she had to say about me? Do you see what she sees in me?’ I wanted my daughter’s opinion on this . . . I just wanted to see if she saw any of these things my counselor sees in me, but I don’t see me . . . people don’t see me that way . . .</td>
<td>Client wanted to know if a close other saw in her what her counselor could see in her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>I let my husband read it . . . it helped him to try to be a little better of a husband . . . he was able to see a little bit more of me, of what I have been trying to tell him. It helped him want to see me and what I am going through, like with my problems.</td>
<td>Desire to be understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>I told everybody that I got a letter. I wanted my daughter to read it. I just want them to see what I am going through . . . kind of what helps me outside of the counseling, like to talk to more people like openly. They kind of understand what I am going through.</td>
<td>Sharing letter with significant other(s) has an impact on them too and helps with understanding of client concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>My girlfriend wanted to read it. She read it, and it made her cry. She’s not a huge crier, but I don’t know, something about it . . . she found it touching.</td>
<td>Desire to share the letter with close others in order to help them understand what client is going through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>[Did not share letter with anyone].</td>
<td>The letter has an emotional impact on those client shares it with</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 11

**Individual Participant Viewpoints**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbatim Textual Statements</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>It helped me see how I can use some of the stuff from our session in my day to day life.</td>
<td>Clients are able to transfer learnings from the counseling session into daily life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading this letter gave me a chance to relive what I talked about or relive what I heard . . . it gave me that trigger to relive that memory . . .</td>
<td>Helps client relive counseling session and aids with memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Seeing it handwritten out . . . she really meant it . . . it made more of an impact on me . . . it’s personal . . . she took the time and effort . . . it means something more when people write out stuff than type something up . . . When I saw four pages, I was like, ‘Wow! That’s a lot!’ I was touched by it . . . she took the time to actually write all of this out . . . She wrote in the letter about me being ‘colorful.’ When I read that, I thought, ‘Hmm . . . ’ I wasn’t ‘colorful’ . . . I was too afraid . . . and that was touching . . . it’s a whole new beginning for me . . . ‘colorful’ . . . I thought, I am going to go there . . . and that’s how I looked at it . . . a colorful life . . . it really sunk in.</td>
<td>Handwritten letters feel more personal and reflect counselor use of time and effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>He used my words . . . ‘destroyed’ . . . I didn’t really remember exactly saying that . . . it pointed out how I felt.</td>
<td>Length of letter reflects counselor use of time and is touching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The part that didn’t stick out to me stuck out to my husband, and the part that was littler to him stuck out to me.</td>
<td>Counselor’s use of client’s specific language in the letter helps client recall their experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Different aspects of the letter are viewed with greater or lesser significance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(table continues)*
**Individual Participant Viewpoints**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Verbatim Textual Statements</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>It would be helpful if he were to write a letter like once a month, not only for me, but also like for other people...you kind of realize what you missed and what you need to go over in the next session.</td>
<td>Receiving more than one letter may be helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nobody saw me crying because I was in my own place.</td>
<td>The letter can provide privacy for the client to expression emotions less restrictively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He was right to the point…and honest in the letter.</td>
<td>Some people value counselor honesty and preciseness in the letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>She might get like a sentence in somewhere, but it’s really not an exchange of conversation...so in the letter, it was her turn to address some of the issues we had talked about.</td>
<td>The letter gives the counselor an opportunity to share information with the client not shared in session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I would wonder what it would be like to have the counselor write things in the letter that, um, were like a little bit challenging...you know that wasn’t all nice. I think this could be helpful too, at least in my case.</td>
<td>Interest in receiving challenging feedback from counselor in letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>My counselor doesn’t really bring in her emotions...I was shocked she opened herself up and told me the things she did...she gave a little bit of herself in it...it meant a lot to me.</td>
<td>Counselor transparency is valued some clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think letter writing in counseling should be done like every four months...to know we are on the same track...</td>
<td>Multiple letters are encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Timing of letters is also viewed as an important criteria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

Chapter 3 detailed the findings of this phenomenological inquiry exploring client experiences of receiving a humanistically-oriented counseling letter from a therapist between counseling sessions. Throughout this investigation, the researcher’s personal biases or natural attitude toward the experience of a counseling letter in the therapeutic experience were hopefully bracketed in order to see the individual and collective viewpoints of the phenomenon as participants experienced it. Through a rigorous application of the phenomenological steps outlined above (Moustakas 1994), the data suggested the existence of a shared experience for the collective group of clients who participated in this study. The consequent synthesis is demarcated by the following core themes of participant experience: (a) Ability to re-read counselor communications in letter form increases client reflectiveness, is more “catch-able,” and is viewed as meaningful; (b) The letter had a positive impact on client experiences of the counselor and the counseling relationship; (c) Obtaining counselor perceptions of the client in a letter was noted as surprising and evoked new feelings and thoughts about the self; (d) Letter was viewed as gift-like and preservable for future use; and (e) Desire to share the letter with close others in order to be understood.

In the concluding chapter, the researcher situates the findings of this current investigation in the larger context of the literature discussed in Chapter 1.
Our correspondences show us where our intimacies lie. There is something very sensual about a letter. The physical contact of pen to paper, the time set aside to focus thoughts, the folding of the paper into the envelope, licking it closed, a chosen stamp, and then the release of the letter to the mailbox—are all acts of tenderness. (Williams, 1991, p. 84)

The goal of this phenomenological inquiry was to understand the experiences of six clients who received a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter from their counselor between counseling sessions. The descriptions provided by the participants in this study constituted the data the researcher used to discern the structures of experience relative to the viewpoints of the phenomenon that were shared collectively. There were also a variety of unique viewpoints concerning participants’ experiences of receiving a counseling letter between therapeutic appointments.

The preceding chapter suggested a phenomenological structure that was shared by most of the participants with respect to their perspectives concerning their experience of receiving a counseling letter between sessions from their therapist. This structure is constituted by the following five core themes: (a) Ability to re-read counselor communications in letter form increases client reflectiveness, is more “catch-able,” and is viewed as meaningful; (b) The letter had a positive impact on client experiences of the counselor and the counseling relationship; (c) Obtaining counselor perceptions of the client in a letter was noted as surprising and evoked new feelings and thoughts about the self; (d) Letter was viewed as gift-like and preservable for future use; and (e) Desire to
share the letter with close others in order to be understood. These themes are discussed below in the context of a general synthesis.

The intent of this chapter is to: (a) provide a brief discussion of each of the core themes depicted in the previous chapter and individual viewpoints expressed by participants that were not shared by the group collectively, (b) highlight a relationship between the outcomes of this inquiry and previous research conducted with respect to experiences of letter writing in counseling and outline the significance of the research outcomes, (c) discuss the limitations and delimitations of this particular study, (d) offer reflections with respect to areas of application for counseling practice and counselor education, (d) suggest recommendations for future research with respect to the use of counseling letters in client and counselor experience, and (f) to offer my thoughts with respect to my experience as the researcher in this study.

**Brief Discussion of Core Themes**

This section contains a summative narrative about each of the core themes outlined in the previous chapter. The implications of these themes are discussed in a later section of this concluding chapter. It should be noted that while these results are not intended for generalization due to the small number of participants and the qualitative nature of this research, it is hoped that they can contribute to and extend the conversation concerning letter writing practice in the therapeutic relationship. This section inferences possibilities with respect to the latter.
Core Theme 1: Ability to Re-Read Counselor Communications in Letter Form

Increases Client Reflectiveness, is More “Catch-Able,” and is Viewed as Meaningful

As a consequence of reading the counseling letter between sessions, clients described thinking about themselves, the work they were doing with their counselor, and their problems with increased attention. Clients would often look back at themselves with respect to a particular issue with which they have been struggling such as a negative view held about the self.

Clients described reading particular segments of the letter that “stuck out” to them and asking reflective questions of themselves which aided with increased awareness about significant aspects of experience with respect to a particular therapeutic goal such as the transition from motherhood to independence or unresolved grief and loss issues. It appeared that clients were able to be less distracted when reading the letter than when in a counseling session talking about difficult issues. The letter also aided clients with being able to remember counselor feedback and think about material from the session outside in their daily lives. Clients further noted the significance of being able to read particular comments they had disclosed while in a counseling session with their counselor in the letter.

The tangible nature of the letter was noted by participants. The letter provided an additional layer of sensory, therapeutic experience in that it can be held and looked at by the client. Clients described the significance of holding the letter in their hands, and examining it closely in order to interpret the counselor’s words correctly. The
significance of “looking” at the counselor’s words on the paper was noted as being an important aspect of client experience.

The ability to read the letter multiple times appeared to increase the client’s capacity to understand the counselor and interpret and retain the things being said in the letter. Clients noted that they could read the letter in a place without distractions and could go back to the letter on different days in order to comprehend it. The significance of being able to read the letter at a pace desirable for each client was noted. Clients described gaining new insights as they read the letter multiple times, stating that with each re-reading, new information was gleaned.

Clients described difficulties with hearing counselor feedback in a session due to perceptions that the counselor does not mean what he or she is saying and is just trying to make the client feel better about their problems. Clients also noted that sometimes they are “too depressed” in a session to hear what the counselor is saying to them and reported that it is often difficult to remember the majority of what was said afterward.

Clients viewed the counselor communications in the letter as being more meaningful and in some cases, more believable. Clients described being able to “catch more” of what the counselor is trying to say in a letter, noting that often what is said in a face-to-face meeting “washes over” the client and is lost.

The significance of the counselor taking the time to write a personal letter to the client impacted the client’s perception of the letter itself. Due to client perceptions about the letter being a personal and meaningful experience, the information in the letter was given added importance and was considered multiple times.
Core Theme 2: The Letter had a Positive Impact on Client Experiences of the Counselor and the Counseling Relationship

Clients often described feeling unsure or nervous talking about problematic aspects of self openly with their counselor before receiving the letter, advising they did not know how their counselor really saw them or thought about them with respect to their problems. Clients described having questions of “care” with regard to their counselor. Many clients talked about doubting the degree of their counselor’s caring for them, describing it in some cases as a “talk they learn to say.” Clients also described feelings of uncertainty which were related to how their counselor actually viewed them due to the fact that in most cases, the counselor had not been transparent regarding their feelings and thoughts about the client up until the reception of the letter.

Clients described the letter as communicating genuine caring and helped to dispel previously held doubts regarding the way in which their counselor viewed them with respect to their concerns. The counselor’s use of time, thoughtfulness, and effort appeared to suggest a more sincere level of caring than was previously experienced in the relationship. Some clients described previous to the letter that their counselor was someone “paid” to talk to them and viewed the letter as something the counselor does in their own time in order to support the client but receives no financial compensation for this activity. Clients described feeling touched and having warm feelings when they realized that their counselor thinks about them when they are not together. The letter supported clients in considering this reality.
The experience of clients feeling understood and seen by their respective
counselor also appeared to contribute to increased feelings of openness in the counseling
relationship. The participants in this research consistently reported feeling like their
counselor really understood them and the issues they were struggling with as a result of
the counselor communicating their perception of the client in the letter. This suggests
that in most cases, clients would often hold back or be dishonest in the counseling session
due to feeling unsure as to what the counselor was actually thinking about them. The
experience of receiving the counselor’s thoughts about the issues the client was bringing
to the counseling experience encouraged clients to “want to trust more” and to “be more
open” in subsequent meetings.

In many cases, clients talked about their perceptions of their counselor shifting in
a positive direction as a result of receiving a counseling letter from him or her. Linda
described how as she read the letter, she was able to “realize” in her “mind” that her
counselor was “there to help” her. This replaced a previous assumption that her
counselor was there to “tell me I am crazy.” Another client talked about her feelings
about the relationship with her counselor changing from a previous view of doctor-patient
to being “more personal” and “even like friendship.” She described an increased
willingness to “confide” in her counselor about problems in her life. In all cases, clients
reported a shift in perception with respect to their counselor, suggesting that the
counselor became a personal companion to support the client on their journey with the
unique struggles they are facing in their lives.
Core Theme 3: Obtaining Counselor Perception of Client in Letter was Noted as Surprising and Evoked New Feelings and Thoughts About the Self

Clients described “not knowing” how the counselor actually saw them or thought about the issues they were dealing with and discussing in the counseling experience. Clients explained that previous to the letter, their counselor had withheld their perception about them and in some cases, assumed their counselor viewed them negatively. Clients reported anxiety about receiving a letter due to feelings of anticipation about receiving “negativeness” or the counselor telling them to work on additional things.

Clients described feeling “relieved” at the content of the letter, explaining they did not expect the letter to be positive or encouraging in nature. Clients also described feeling excitement at receiving the letter in the mail. In most cases, these initial feelings of excitement were tempered by anxious feelings related to the uncertainty of the letter’s content. Clients explained reading the letter several times due to its positive nature. Each client described the experience of feeling “surprised” as a result of reading her counselor’s affirming perception of them in the letter. Reading the counselor’s positive perception of the client and the issues being discussed in counseling enabled clients to feel “good” and “better than before” reading the letter. Clients also noted feelings of “relief” and “joy” that their counselor saw them more positively than they had assumed. The experience of surprising feelings appeared to have held two meanings. The first was the surprise that came as a result of expectations of negativity being dispelled due to the positive nature of the letter. The second level of surprise appeared to be related to the
clients’ experience of considering their counselor’s positive perception of themselves which contradicted a view of self that was primarily disapproving.

This experience of being surprised seemed to give way to increased feelings of comfort in the counseling relationship and also with the self. The experience of surprise also appeared to disrupt the client’s conditioned way of thinking about themselves enough so that they could consider alternate ways of feeling or thinking about themselves and the difficulties they were experiencing. Charlotte related that after receiving her counselor’s perception of her, she asked herself, “Why does she see me that way? I had to think about it.” Reading the counselor’s view of the client that was alternate to the client’s conditioned way of seeing themselves aided with increased feelings of esteem.

In most cases, clients described feeling good internally as a result of receiving their counselor’s perspective about them and advised that their counselor’s feedback supported them in reexamining a chronically-held negative view of self. Clients reported a variety of emotional responses while reading the letter from their counselor and attributed this to the positive nature of the letter. The counselor’s positive and personal perception of the client communicated to the client in the letter also appeared to support clients in attending to their own feelings at a greater depth, such that new thoughts about the self could emerge and be considered.

Core Theme 4: The Letter is Viewed as Gift-Like and Preservable for Future Use

Clients described receiving the letter in the mail as an “exciting” experience that produced varied emotional responses. Clients generally described anticipating the reception of the letter and explained that receiving something in the mail from another
person that was not a bill was desired. Clients viewed the letter as being an experience similar to “opening a gift” from someone in their life and reported feelings of happiness. Other clients noted the infrequency of receiving letters in the mail and described the experience as being unique.

The letter was something that could be kept and retained for future use. Clients described the letter as timeless, in that it is something that can be kept “forever” and is a reminder of the work they were doing in counseling. Other participants described a desire to return to the letter from time to time in order to determine their progress after the counseling experience had concluded. Some of the participants noted that the letter could be a reminder of something positive if they were ever feeling negatively about themselves in the future. In addition, one participant described a desire to share the letter with her children when they are older so that they could understand what the client was going through with respect to a difficult decision about her marriage. Another participant noted that the letter will serve as a reminder of her relationship with her therapist.

The capacity to keep and preserve the letter for future usages was noted by each participant in the study. It also appeared that the letter appeared to take on additional unique meanings for each client in this study and evidenced a particularly special experience in the client’s life. Preserving the letter enabled the client to hold on to a portion of this experience and to remember it through the passing of time.
Core Theme 5: Desire to Share the Letter With Close Others in Order to be Understood

Participants collectively expressed their desire and excitement to share the letter with either a family member or a close friend. In one instance, a client’s friend requested to read the letter, and the client gave her permission. In other instances, clients reported that it was important for them to share the letter with someone in their life so that they could see what the client was going through with respect to the issues they were discussing with their counselor. It appeared that clients were able to disclose their experience to others with greater ease as a result of being able to share the letter with people in their lives.

It was apparent that participants held expectations of being understood by significant others in their lives and also were interested in whether or not the person the letter was shared with was able to identify with the positive aspects of the client the counselor commented on in the letter. Clients also appeared to want to share the letter in order to gain support with respect to their concerns. Support appeared to take the form of increased understanding, a confirming or validating view of self as positive, and acceptance.

It was noted that clients described varied responses with respect to how the people they chose to share the letter with responded to its content. Some described the letter as having an impact on the outside reader and his or her perception of the client and their concerns while another described feeling more understood about a particular issue. Another participant described a desire to share the letter with family members in the
future in order to gain understanding about the issues she was working on in counseling with her therapist.

**Findings Related to Letter Writing in Counseling**

The focus of this investigation was to understand the experiences of clients receiving counseling services that simultaneously received a humanistically-oriented counseling letter from their therapist between sessions. Previous scholarly research concerning the use of therapeutic letters had been conducted in the nursing field and examined families’ experiences of receiving a letter written by a team of nurses from a narrative orientation (Moules, 2000). Moules suggested that future qualitative research be conducted to explore the experiences of clients receiving counseling letters in the mental health field. This research was in part a direct response to this gap in the literature. It was hoped that the findings from this research could support and contribute to the existing literature regarding the use of therapeutic letter writing in clinical practice with clients with varying mental health concerns.

Due to the qualitative nature of the research design used in this study, the findings are not generalizable beyond the sample of participants involved in this particular investigation. However, one could possibly suspect generalizability to other clients of similar dispositions. As researcher, I was interested in understanding several perspectives with respect to the experience of a particular type of counseling letter provided to clients between sessions and viewed a phenomenological research methodology as an appropriate medium to conduct this inquiry. It was also noted that in the literature, few examples of qualitative research examined the viewpoints of clients
who received a counseling letter from their therapist. The majority of previous studies related to the use of counseling letters have either been quantitative in nature or focused exclusively on the experiences of counselors who were writing letters to clients. In addition, there had been no previous research conducted with respect to the use of letters written from a humanistic expression of relatedness. Additionally, I was interested in the significance of this type of counseling letter as expressed through the viewpoints of clients who received them during the counseling relationship.

In the literature review section of Chapter 1, there were multiple examples of research conducted concerning the use of therapeutic letters in varying professional contexts. In this chapter, I connect the results of this investigation with findings from previous examples of research regarding therapeutic letters in clinical practice.

**Synthesis of Current Study and Previous Investigations of Letter Writing in Counseling**

“She wants to be on this journey with me” (Lisa).

It is essential to compare and contrast what was discovered in this current research regarding client perceptions of receiving a counseling letter from his or her therapist between counseling appointments with what has previously been found regarding the impact of counseling letters in client experiences of the therapeutic process. Situating the research findings next to the existing literature enhances the value of a qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 2002). Many of the core themes and individual viewpoints that emerged in this current investigation are consistent with the existing research literature concerning client experiences of therapeutic letters.
Core Theme 1: Ability to Re-Read Counselor Communications in Letter Form

Increases Client Reflectiveness, is More “Catch-Able,” and is Viewed as Meaningful

Previous research suggests that one counseling letter is often viewed by clients as being more valuable than face to face meetings with the counselor (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This previous research was presented quantitatively, and letters were conceptualized by clients as being worth the equivalent of 3 to 10 counseling appointments, that is of significant worth. It should be noted that without the establishment of rapport through face-to-face meetings, the capacity for a letter to be experienced by clients as therapeutic or meaningful would likely not be possible.

This present investigation was interested in exploring the significance of a counseling letter in the client’s experience by asking the client to describe the way in which the letter impacted them as a result of receiving it outside of the counseling appointment. The participants in this research did not compare the letter to an equivalent amount of counseling sessions but consistently described the letter as being a very meaningful experience. Some of the essential features reported by the clients in this study with respect to the therapeutic value of the letter were: (a) the letter encouraged clients to consider counselor feedback outside of the counseling session; (b) clients consistently perceived counselor caring in the letter and viewed feedback as being sincere and personal; and (c) the feedback in the letter was “seen,” “heard,” and “remembered” due to the tangible nature of the letter and the ability to hold the letter and return to it multiple times. The perceptions expressed by the clients in this current study regarding the significance of being able to read counselor communications in letter form was
confirming of previous literature in which clients were found to value written information provided to them by their counselor (Wagner, 1977).

Previous research studies also noted the relationship between client experiences of counseling letters and post-session reflection (Bell et al., 2009; Epston, 1994; Moules, 2000). This present study appeared to confirm these findings. All of the participants reported a shared experience of reflection about self as a result of reading the letter from their counselor. The majority of participants described an increased willingness to “look back” at themselves and to consider their counselor’s comments over an extended period of time. In some instances, clients would ask reflective questions of themselves such as in the case of Charlotte, “Why does my counselor see me that way?” and “Will I be alone or less connected?” She noted that being able to consider her counselor’s positive perception of her supported her in challenging a constraining belief she has held about herself for several years. The experience of “sitting back” was also noted across participant experience as a by-product of reading the letter. Megan described her experience of sitting back, “Reading down through it, I felt enlightened. ‘Wow, I said that?’ You sit back and think about your life. There’s more to me. I have feelings. I am a human being. It let me reflect a lot.” While Megan described the letter as “letting” her sit back, it appeared to provide her with a context that encouraged her to reflect about her life. The participants in this study were able to control the context and manner in which the letter was read. The clients in this inquiry each suggested that returning to the letter at different times helped them to be reminded of “good things” about themselves and led to new insights.
The tangible nature of the letter appeared to have an impact on client experience. The letter appeared to support the participants in this study by providing them with a document that is about them which has been written from the perspective of their counselor. The experience of being able to “see” her counselor’s feedback to her in the letter was an important component of Cassie’s experience of the letter.

People in my life are always telling me about the positive things about me. I only hear the negative things though. When he wrote the things that he did about me in the letter, I could actually see it. I could read it over and over, and it stuck out to me . . . like more than it does when he says it to me. I usually just forget about it when things are told to me that are positive. When it was right there in front of my face, it is just easier to believe I guess.

As noted in previous research, one of the advantages of a counseling letter is that it enables clients to retain and process more information due to the tendency for spoken words to be forgotten over time (Epston, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). The participants in this study noted the significance of being able to read the information in the counseling letter. Clients commented on being able to “hold” the letter and “look at it” several times in order to retain the information for a longer period of time and consider the self from an alternative perspective (e.g., the counselor’s perception and thinking about the client), which can be a key issue in the therapeutic experience. The word ‘therapy’ originates from the Greek word, ‘theoria,’ as does the word, ‘tourist’ (Walter, 1988). It appeared that as a result of receiving a counseling letter, clients were supported in becoming more curious about themselves and in some ways, tourist-like toward a previously unexplored
landscape of self. Being able to read the counselor’s feedback about the client and their concerns seemed to aid clients in viewing the sites of themselves so that they could tentatively consider a new and more affirming story of self within a unique landscape of challenges.

Core Theme 2: The Letter had a Positive Impact on Client Experiences of the Counselor and the Counseling Relationship

Previous research (Andrews et al. 1997; Pyle, 2009; Rodgers, 2009) discussed the significance of the counseling letter in the counseling relationship. In these previous studies, clients noted increased feelings of closeness with their counselor after receiving a counseling letter. In this present study, a connection was made between the impact of the letter on clients’ feelings about their counselors and the residual carryover of increased safety and trust in the counseling relationship. Clients described the letter as impacting the nature of the relationship between client and counselor, oftentimes imbuing the alliance with qualities of friendship. While the majority of the participants in this study described a view about their counselor as being “friend-like,” it appeared that this relational shift was comprised of four phenomenological structures or sub-themes: (a) “[My counselor] is someone that listens to the things I say and genuinely cares for me;” (b) “[My counselor] is trustworthy, and I can open up to him more now;” (c) “[My counselor] does not judge me or think I am crazy;” and (d) “[My counselor] thinks about me when we are not together.” In response to this shift of client perception about their counselor and the counseling alliance, clients described an increased confidence to “confide in” or reveal more of themselves to their therapist. This was a significant
perception this present study contributed to the existing literature regarding the impact of a humanistically-oriented counseling letter on the client’s experience of their counselor and the therapeutic relationship.

Another important viewpoint that was expressed by the participants in this study is the perception of counselor caring. The majority of clients in this study held some reservations with respect to the degree of caring their counselor felt for them. Cassie described this viewpoint before receiving the counseling letter.

I just sometimes think he wasn’t really listening or if I was just another person that was like, “Let’s get her out of here.” Getting the letter helped me see that he does listen and that I’m not just another person. I always think I’m last on everyone’s list. My problems aren’t rare . . . everybody’s going through depression, so, it’s like maybe as my counselor, he gets tired of hearing everybody’s problems . . . but it’s like how could he care for so many people. But maybe he does. I think it communicated that he really does care.

She additionally suggested thematic difficulties with being able to trust others in her life. When asked to describe the impact of the letter in her counseling experience, she stated, “It helped me trust him faster, like usually it takes me a long time to really trust someone.” Cassie went on to explain that she had thoughts about not going back to see her counselor after their first couple of appointments due to questions she held about whether or not he was “really listening” to her. She described having “no hope” due to her perception that he “doesn’t listen and care.” She explained that after she got the
letter, “It made me want to go more.” Megan reported a similar viewpoint, explaining that after reading the letter, she “wanted to go back.”

Charlotte and Megan described how getting a letter from their counselor symbolized the counselor’s use of personal time outside of the constraints of the counseling session to reflect about the client in order to provide support. This appeared to shift participants’ perceptions about their counselor from “someone who is paid to listen” to their problems to being a “person” that is “really trying to help me.” Some of the participants in this study noted the significance of the letter’s impact on being able to relate to their counselor as a “person” and “not just as a patient.” This finding is consistent with previous research by Rodgers (2009) in which clients noted being able to relate to the counselor as a “person” and not to their professional “role” of “someone who is paid” to listen and offer help.

The experiences of participants in this study indicated that there was a positive shift of perception regarding their experience of the counselor. More rigid and clearly defined boundaries in the therapeutic alliance gave way for increased intimacy due to participant experiences of counselor transparency, use of personal time to reflect about client concerns, and a perceived willingness on the part of the counselor to communicate these thoughts “personally,” “sincerely,” and “honestly” in a letter.

It appeared that the participants in this study saw the counseling relationship as an important determinant of perceived success with counseling goals and a willingness to continue in therapy. Megan summated this perception,
If you are going to spill your guts to somebody, you better like them and for her to come back to me through the letter to make me feel like she’s my girlfriend that I can just unload to and no one’s going to judge . . . you have to have that kind of relationship.

This investigation highlighted the significance of receiving a relationally-oriented letter in client experience. As a consequence, participants felt “more bonded” and “connected” to their counselor and reported an increased willingness to disclose aspects of experience that their counselor did not know about them. Increased feelings of connection were often linked by the participants in this study to having their concerns validated in the letter and the experience of feeling understood by the counselor. The common description provided by the participants upon reading the letter initially was, “My counselor really gets me.”

Previous scholarly research concerning the therapeutic experiences of clients who receive a counseling letter from their therapist indicated the letter’s ability to influence the nature of the counseling alliance in a positive or more cohesive direction (Alexander et al., 2008; Andrews et al., 1997; Bacigalupe, 2003; Goldberg, 2000; Moules, 2009; Pyle, 2006; Rodgers, 2009). This present research provides supplementary perspectives that confirm this previous research. In addition, the viewpoints expressed by the six participants in this study offer insights that aid with being able to understand some of the unique ways in which clients give relational meaning to receiving a counseling letter from their counselor.
This study is the only investigation known to explore the experiences of clients in mental health that receive a counseling letter written from a relationship-centered perspective. The findings in this study suggest that a humanistically-oriented counseling letter positively influenced client perceptions of the counselor and the therapeutic alliance. A significant contribution this present study suggests is the impact of the letter on the client’s experience of feeling understood by the counselor and thematically perceiving the counselor as being trustworthy and nonjudgmental.

**Core Theme 3: Obtaining Counselor Perception of Client in Letter was Noted as Surprising and Evoked New Feelings and Thoughts About the Self**

Previous research suggested that counseling letters can aid clients in discovering a more positive and affirming view of self through the counselor’s expression of his or her perception of the client in light of difficulties (Rombach, 2003). Additionally, the experiences of the participants in this investigation are comparable to the viewpoints expressed in Maybin’s (2001) research concerning death row inmates who received letters from pen-pals. In both studies, the participants described being able to consider aspects of themselves in new or different ways. In the case of this present research, participants frequently noted that they were able to consider perceived deficits of self more positively through the feedback provided to them by their counselor in the letter.

Participants in this current study described the significance of the letter supporting them in finding out how their counselor actually thinks about them and their concerns and reported varied feelings with respect to this experience. Participants shared feelings of being “unsure” about their counselor’s perception and feelings about them previous to
receiving the letter. The participants in this study described feeling “reaffirmed,” “good inside,” and “happy” after reading the letter due to the positive nature of their counselor’s perception about them and the struggles they were going through in their lives. In some instances, the participants described that hearing the counselor’s positive view of them in the letter encouraged them to refute or disconfirm a negatively held view of self.

This current research validated the findings from Goldberg’s (2000) study concerning the use of therapeutic letters with “troubled adolescents” (p. 63). In this present research, clients noted the significance of their counselor providing feedback about how they view them as a person. In each case, counselor’s disclosures about the client were concerned with providing a positive view of a particular area of client experience such as feelings about self as a mother or in some instances, a wife. The participants in this study reported that reading the counselor’s positive view about them in the letter was “surprising” (e.g., unexpected), provided “relief,” and challenged them to consider a perspective about themselves that is potentially more accurate and preferable.

The findings from this research depart from the existing literature with respect to participant experiences of “anxiety” or “anticipation” to receive the counseling letter due to feeling “unsure” about how their counselor viewed them previous to receiving the letter. The participants noted in this research that before receiving the letter, they did not know how their counselor “saw them” or thought about their concerns, due to difficulties with hearing or remembering counselor feedback in session or lack of counselor transparency concerning his or her experience of the client. Megan assumed that her
counselor saw her negatively, even though she had been meeting with her counselor for over a year.

Oh, I’m just another client that’s spilling her guts and doesn’t have a happy home life or has problems and blah, blah, blah. I don’t like people to think badly of me, but I don’t want to be the whiny 54 year old who, you know, sits there and says, “Look at my life!”

Megan described that after finding out in the letter that her counselor “cherishes” her and looks forward to their time together, it helped her to conceptualize her issues as being “more valid.” Megan noted an increased desire to reveal “bad” aspects of self that she had not shared with her counselor previously, saying, “It’s time to open up about these things.” Participants described being “more comfortable” with their counselor after “finding out” how they saw them in light of past foibles and the present challenges they were facing in their lives.

In most cases, the participants in this research projected a negative view of self onto their counselor. This assumption appeared to influence the degree of disclosure in the counseling experience. The participants described feeling like they had to “lie” or “withhold” certain aspects of themselves due to fears about their counselor seeing them as being additionally “bad,” “crazy,” “couky,” or “nuts.” These viewpoints are significant because it suggests that the participants in this study valued their counselor’s view about them and noted anxious feelings and fears of counselor judgment due to “not knowing” what the counselor “really thought” about them. While some of the participants commented that they thought their counselor had probably told them in a
counseling session about how they thought about them, they noted difficulties with retaining this information afterward. The letters in this study appeared to leave an indelible stamp on client experience with respect to the participants being able to “clearly see” how their counselor feels about them as a “person.”

Obtaining the counselor’s perception of the client in the letter was consistently described by the participants in this study as being “surprising” due to the positive nature of the counselor’s perception of the client which contradicted the client’s negative view of self. In addition, clients described being unsure about their counselor’s feelings and thoughts about them previous to receiving the letter due to their perception that their counselor had not been transparent about their experience of the client in counseling appointments. Counselor self-disclosure about the client in the letter was a significant viewpoint expressed by the participants in this study.

Core Theme 4: The Letter is Viewed as Gift-Like and Preservable for Future Use

This present investigation additionally confirms a theme discussed in Moules’ (2000) research with respect to the timelessness of the letter. Participants in this research described the letter as being “gift-like” and “special” and noted that they would return to the letter in the future in order to be reminded of positive feelings and to see “how far” they have come since being out of counseling. Previous literature had related how recipients of therapeutic letters experienced the letter as a unique gift from their practitioner (Mallon, 2009). Previous research did not contain participant viewpoints related to the experience of receiving the counseling letter in the mail. Participants described this with mixed emotion. Some described feelings of “excitement” and
“anticipation” and others noted “nervousness” due to being “unsure” about the content of the letter and “not knowing what to expect.” Three of the participants revealed that it was “nice” to get something in the mail that was not “negative,” such as a “bill.” Nikki talked about the length of time it had been since she had received a letter from someone in the mail. Receiving a letter from the counselor in the mail was marked as positive, although it was accompanied with varied feelings due to client uncertainty about the letter’s content.

The letter was noted by participants as being something they could keep “for a long time” and in some cases, “forever.” The preservable nature of the letter was important for the participants in this study because it could be referenced over time in order to “remember” the “good feelings” it produced in them when they initially read it. Megan and Linda talked about returning to the letter in order to “see how far” they have come as a result of their experiences with their therapist. Linda additionally suggested,

Even after the counseling is over, it will help me with what I need to go through. I can go back to it and it will help me move on in my next phase of counseling, even if I would have to change counselors. I think it would make it okay, because I knew he was there to help me understand what I am going through.

The letter was given to clients from the counselor and was something that the clients in this study viewed with special meaning. All of the participants returned to the letter at different times, and most of them talked about re-reading the letter at some future point. Multiple reasons were given for this, including to be reminded of positive feelings, to read the counselor’s feedback, and to view progress post-counseling. Within this core
theme, Lisa revealed a unique viewpoint with respect to how she plans to use the letter at a future time.

   It’s something I could show my kids, you know I just want you to understand that this wasn’t a decision that I made overnight. I want you guys to get that I didn’t just give up and walk away . . . that it was something I thought a lot about and was even in counseling for.

   A primary issue Lisa was attempting to explore in counseling was feelings of guilt about ending her relationship with her husband. A portion of her guilt was related to concerns about how her children might judge her for this decision as they grow into adulthood. For Lisa, the letter was important because it could potentially help her children understand the choices she had made with respect to her relationship with their father. A fundamental essence of shared participant experience was the desire to retain the letter for an indefinite amount of time due to its perceived helpfulness. Preserving the letter to return to for future use was marked as a significant contribution to the existing literature.

Core Theme 5: Desire to Share the Letter With Close Others in Order to be Understood

   Previous research has discussed the capacity for the letter to create an audience to reinforce the emergence of a new experience of self (Bateson, 1972; Bell et al., 2009; White & Epston, 1990). In previous research concerning narrative therapy, clients were often encouraged by the counselor in a letter to share their “news of difference” regarding therapeutic change with an outside audience consisting of family and friends. The
participants in this study appeared to have some difficulty talking about their counseling experience with close others in their world. The letter was something that could be “shown” or “given” to another person to read, and clients often noted “excitement” to share the letter with another person. Five of the six participants in this study made the decision to share the letter with at least one other person in their lives. It appeared in most cases, the intention was to see whether or not the recipient of the letter was able to see in the client the counselor’s affirming perspective of the client that had been communicated in the letter. Charlotte reported that she made the decision to share the letter with her youngest daughter,

I asked my daughter, ‘Do you want to read the letter? Well, it’s about me. Don’t you want to hear what she had to say about me? Do you see what she sees in me?’ . . . I just wanted to see if she saw any of these things my counselor sees in me, cause I don’t see me.

Charlotte’s experience indicates that it was important to have her counselor’s positive view of her confirmed by another person in her life. While Charlotte reported feeling “happy” and “good inside” to read her counselor’s positive view of her, she maintained doubts and asked her daughter to verify this new perspective. It also appeared that Charlotte was using the letter to seek additional feedback about herself from another person in her life. Charlotte noted that she had “never asked anyone before” about how they saw her.

Additionally, the participants in this current study described wanting to share the letter in order to help significant others understand what they were going through. Linda
provided an example of this viewpoint, stating, “I told everybody that I got a letter. I wanted my daughter to read it. I just want them to see what I am going through.”

It also appeared that clients shared the letter with others in order to have particular aspects of their experience feel more accepted. These viewpoints are comparable to previous research conducted by Epston (1994) concerning the use of counseling letters to aid clients in sharing “news of change” with an outside audience such as friends and/or family members. This research suggests that clients attempted to use the letter to aid them in having their struggles acknowledged or understood by key others in their lives.

**Unique Viewpoints**

In addition to the shared nature of participants’ experiences with respect to the phenomenon of receiving a counseling letter from their therapist, there were also viewpoints that were expressed by participants in this study that were either singular or shared by only one other participant. While these perspectives were not considered to construct the core themes of experience, they were viewed as noteworthy and were included for discussion purposes.

Moules’ (2000) study suggested several additional significant outcomes with respect to patient experiences with receiving a narrative therapeutic letter while experiencing a major medical illness. Two examples of the research findings from this study were acknowledgment of suffering and being able to remember important aspects of the counseling session. Nikki and Cassie explained that the letter aided them with being able to remember content from the session that had been forgotten previous to
receiving the letter. One client described how the letter helped her to “relive” a particular memory from a counseling session that she had forgotten.

In response to the letter’s capacity to acknowledge client suffering, Lisa stated,

I saw how she feels about me. She understands my struggles. She understands that I’m not making quick decisions, and that there aren’t any easy fixes for this, and it’s going to take some time . . . she knows I’m tired.

Charlotte additionally added, “I saw that in the letter. She knows how I struggle with that issue.” The participants in this study noted the significance of being able to “see” their counselor’s understanding of them and their concerns and to have this communicated by the counselor in a letter.

Other themes identified in this present study that reinforce previous research findings are the letter’s ability to increase client hopefulness about their concerns and the ability to become better (Goldberg, 2000; Moules, 2000). Charlotte and Cassie both described feeling “more hope” as a result of reading the letter. They attributed this experience of increased hope to their perception of their counselor “being someone that really wants to help” them with their problems. This viewpoint emerged as a result of receiving a letter from their counselor which was viewed as an activity that was done to support the client outside of the constraints of the counseling appointment.

Participants also noted that the letter helped them evaluate their progress and growth by “seeing” their counselor’s comments in writing about the work they have done in counseling (Moules, 2000). Linda and Megan recommended that the counselor write
more than one letter in order to help evaluate progress by comparing the letters to one another and to “make sure” they are on the “same track” with their counselor.

The significance of the counselor writing about important moments of a previous counseling session was noted by participants and is consistent with previous literature (Goldberg, 2000). Linda described the importance of her counselor writing about a song she had discussed that she has connected to the death of her brother. Nikki talked about the importance of her counselor writing about the people she had mentioned in a dream during a previous counseling session. Nikki noted that this made her “feel good” that her counselor “saw” that this was important to her and wrote about it in the letter. She stated, “I looked at it more.” Counselor inclusion of client disclosures in previous sessions in the letter appeared to communicate to the client that the counselor was listening to them and supported clients in considering these portions of the letter with increased attention.

Nikki and Linda explained that the letter helped them think about and remember material discussed with their counselor in previous counseling sessions. Additionally, the letter aided them in thinking about transferring the work they were doing in therapy into their “day to day life.” While this was not a theme shared by the majority of participants, it was marked as significant due to the fact that two participants were able to use the letter in a way that enabled them to extend the counseling conversation and make it more applicable in their lives.

This present study confirmed previous research findings with respect to client experience of counselor transparency in a therapeutic letter (Pyle, 2009). Some of the participants noted the counselor’s willingness to “share” aspects of himself or herself in
the letter. Cassie explained that when her counselor talked about his feelings in the letter, it made the counseling relationship feel more “two-way” or reciprocal. Megan described the importance of her counselor “bringing in her feelings” in the letter, stating, “She has never really done that before.” Megan additionally noted the experience of her counselor’s disclosure about how she thinks about Megan sometimes when she is driving home. Megan’s initial reaction to this while reading it was, “Wow! She’s thinking about me as she’s driving home. I just don’t think I am that unique of a person.” Megan later shared that this experience helped her to consider how she “takes” herself “for granted” in much of her life and to consider the possibility that she is “special.” Cassie described the significance of her counselor’s disclosure about her impact on him as a future parent as being important and that it “made” her feel like she is “doing something right” as a mother. Megan added that it was “nice” that she was able to “teach my counselor something,” suggesting that she did not think she “had anything to offer.” Counselor use of self-disclosure in the letter with respect to client experience was frequently noted and described by the clients in this study as therapeutically helpful.

Charlotte and Cassie commented on the handwritten nature of the letter, explaining that it felt “more personal” because of the perception that it was not done out of obligation. Charlotte also discussed the significance of the length of the letter, exclaiming, “Four pages. Wow! It meant a lot.” The length was noted and reflected counselor use of time away from the counseling session to support the client with their therapeutic goals. Counselor attention to length and personal touches such as writing the letter by hand appeared to aid clients in experiencing the letter with added meaning due
to the perception that the letter was “not something the counselor felt like she had to get over with.” Charlotte noted that these personal touches reflected counselor “caring.”

Participants consistently marked the experience of being “seen” and “noticed” by their counselor through the experience of the counseling letter. Clients also talked about the significance of the counselor “remembering” client concerns or even subtle details with respect to the client’s presentation, such as “new glasses” or the way a client interacted with her small child during a counseling session. Cassie described how her counselor thought about her outside his own personal life saying, “I stuck out in his head and it made me look at it more.” It appeared that some of the clients in this study shared a similar viewpoint with respect to the letter in that it enabled clients to feel seen and validated in ways that a face-to-face meeting with their counselor could not provide.

Rodgers (2009) additionally discussed the significance of counselor language in the letter. Previous research suggests that the counselor use language that captures the client’s attention and enhances clients’ curiosity about the self. Using client language to depict therapeutic metaphors in the letter was viewed as helpful. In this present study, Charlotte’s counselor wrote about her noticing the “colorful” walls of her office and commented on this in the letter. The counselor built on this idea in the letter and connected it to Charlotte’s tendency to doubt herself and avoid taking risks that could promote personal growth. Charlotte discussed the metaphor of “living a colorful life” several times over the course of the interview process. When she initially received the letter, she commented on how she saw herself as “uncolorful” and “dull” and over the course of reflecting on this metaphor, was able to hold a view of self as being “colorful”
and “capable.” In other instances, the counselor would use specific language used by the client during a previous session. In the case of Cassie, the counselor quoted a comment she had made in a previous session about feeling “destroyed inside.” Cassie explained that this “really stood out” to her when she read the letter. She identified with this feeling and noted that she had described her experience “really well.” In another instance, Cassie commented on how certain parts of the letter “stood out” to her while other parts of the letter stood out to her husband. Language was noted as an explicit determinant of participant experience.

Some of the participants specifically described feeling “appreciative” or “grateful” for the experience of the counseling letter. In one case, Megan talked about wanting to give her counselor a hug the next time they are together. It appeared that the counseling letter was evocative of a variety of responses in the lives of the participants in this study. Some examples of these responses, as discussed above, are increased reflection about the self, feelings about the counseling relationship, noticing appreciative feelings toward the counselor for taking the time to write the letter, the experience of counselor “caring,” and an increased desire to continue working in counseling by disclosing previously unshared aspects of personal experience. These responses are significant contributions to the existing literature concerning client experiences of receiving a counseling letter during therapy.

The participant viewpoints discovered in this current investigation hopefully add to the existing research concerning client experiences of a therapeutic letter received between counseling sessions. These perspectives include client interest in sharing the
letter with a trusted other in order to feel understood, client feelings of anxiety related to
receiving the letter due to not knowing how the counselor felt about them, increased
capacity to reflect about the self, and viewing the letter as being gift-like in nature and
timeless, in that it could be kept forever and returned to for use in the future.

Limitations and Delimitations

A commonly noted limitation in this study was that the participants’ participation
in the study had an apparent impact on their experience. One participant noted that it
“felt good” to talk with me about the letter and another participant noted that talking
about the letter with me helped her to think about an aspect of the letter that she had not
thought of previous to the interview. Another participant was teary while talking to me
about the letter. One participant asked my advice about how to provide her counselor
with feedback. Due to the methodological design of this study, these experiences were
not explored. I attempted to validate these feelings and concerns and additionally
encouraged participants to talk about these experiences with their counselor. However, it
is noted that the discussion about receiving the letter additionally influenced the impact
the letter had on the clients’ experiences.

The contextual parameters for this study should be noted with respect to
delimitations or contraindications that accompany this research. The sample of
participants was relatively small and was representative only of the female gender. I
attempted to invite the participating counselors in this study to offer the research
opportunity to male clients, but there were a limited number of male clients on their
caseloads, and those that were asked did not provide consent. It is also noted that one of
the counselors was a male and the other counselor was a female. The experiences of clients receiving letters from a therapist with respect to gender was not explored nor did it come up in the interviews with participants. This study also excluded young children and adolescents for convenience purposes related to IRB approval requirements. Participants were additionally interviewed about their experience of the counseling letter immediately after receiving the letter. The decision to do this was made in order to obtain as accurately as possible the experience of the letter itself before clients had the opportunity to process it with their therapist. The potential exists for the letters to receive additional therapeutic meaning after it has been discussed in the counseling relationship.

Other delimitations noted were the use of two counselors instead of one therapist. This decision was made in order to obtain additional clients to participate in this study and to have two genders of therapists writing counseling letters. As noted above, I was interested in exploring the experiences of clients in different therapeutic settings (e.g., community mental health and private practice). Other settings such as drug and alcohol treatment facilities and inpatient hospitals were considered but I decided to focus on the above described sites due to perceived challenges of obtaining approval to conduct research in these settings. Another delimitation was the clinical experience of the two counselors in this study. The female counselor has been a professional clinical counselor for several years, and the male counselor is completing his master’s internship and works under the supervisory license of a professional counselor. This concern was considered; however, it was decided that this was acceptable due to the fact that the counseling
student was under close supervision and could be additionally aided by me in constructing the letters.

A final delimitation was the length of time clients were in counseling with their therapist before receiving the initial counseling letter. In the case of the private practice setting, the clients had been receiving counseling services with their therapist for a minimum of eight months. The three participants in the community agency had only been working with their counselor for between two to three months. It was evident that there was a discrepancy with respect to rapport. I concluded that this delimitation was permissible due to the fact that the participants collectively shared the experience of feeling “unsure” and “nervous” about receiving the letter due to doubts about the counselor’s perception of them previous to receiving the counseling letter. Participants self-reported the significance of the letter and its impact on rapport and confidence to explore difficult aspects of experience more openly with their counselor in future sessions.

Implications for Counselor Education and the Counseling Profession

Several implications for the counseling profession and the field of counselor education can be considered in light of the viewpoints expressed by the participants in this investigation.

Letter Writing in the Counseling Profession

Letter writing and the counseling relationship. First, client perceptions concerning the nature of the counseling relationship after receiving a counseling letter between sessions suggest that a counseling letter can support clients in developing
increased feelings of trust in the counseling alliance. Wampold’s (2001) study pointed to the significance of relational factors as a primary determinant for therapeutic gains. In addition, the study conducted by Burns and Nolen-Hoeksema (1992) pointed to the importance of client experiences of counselor empathy in the counseling experience in order for clients to receive therapeutic benefits. The clients participating in this study collectively shared a viewpoint of the letter as influencing their perceptions about the trustworthiness of the counseling relationship and described increased feelings of connection with their counselor as a result of “feeling understood” and experiencing “genuine caring” in the relationship.

In addition, Rogers (1980) encouraged counselors to strive to provide a distinctive type of relationship with facilitative conditions of unconditional positive regard, empathy, and genuineness. In the case of this investigation, the counselors attempted to extend these conditions in the counseling letter in order to support client experience and increase feelings of self-understanding. Client reception of these conditions in the letter appeared to aid the clients in this study in fostering a perception of counselor regard and facilitated the existence of a more positive and tolerant view of self.

The counseling letter also appeared to facilitate relational depth (Mearns & Cooper, 2005) between the clients and counselors in this study. A hallmark of psychological distress is the inability to be in a communicative relationship with another person at a depth necessary to alleviate suffering caused by loneliness (May, 1958; Myers, 2003). Client experiences of receiving a therapeutic letter between counseling
sessions aided clients in feeling more connected with their counselor as a result of feeling understood and having concerns acknowledged empathically.

**Letters can encourage client reflection.** A primary goal of therapy according to many counseling perspectives is to aid clients in reflecting about their experience in order to consider alternate ways of thinking about oneself and one’s relationship to their world (Bugental, 1978; Cain, 2001; White & Epston, 1990). Clients in this study noted that being able to read a letter that contained the counselor’s perspectives concerning the client and their struggles enabled them to think about their situation and to hold alternate, and in some cases, more positive and valuing perspectives toward themselves. In many cases, clients described increased awareness and sensitivity to their feelings, describing positive internal feelings that matched a preferred intrapersonal state.

**Writing to and being with clients.** According to David Epston (1994), counselors have been writing to clients since time immemorial. He explained that counselors have been writing to clients in the form of case notes that are maintained by the therapist to document the content of counseling sessions to aid the counseling process. He explained that these case notes are often impersonal and objective. He suggested that letter writing is a relational tool that enables therapists to write to clients concerning their experience instead of writing about clients. Writing to clients instead of about clients is reflective of relationally attuned practice and can aid counselors in developing increased empathy for client concerns (Mearns & Cooper, 2005). Clients noted that in the letter, they perceived their counselor relating to them as a “person” and “not just as a patient” and described this as being an important component of the letter’s
impact on their relationship with their counselor. Clients were consistently grateful that their counselor took the time to write to them in an effort to provide support and encouragement.

**Letters are hearable and aid client experiences outside of counseling.** Often, clients can be distracted during a counseling session due to feeling flooded as a result of painful disclosures or as a result of anxiety about the counseling experience (Cain & Seeman, 2002; Schneider & Krug, 2010). Clients in this present study described difficulty with “hearing” their counselor’s feedback about them during a session due to questions about the sincerity and intent of the comments and also because it did not match the way they were feeling (e.g., “depressed”) about themselves at the time. Clients reported that being able to read the counselor’s comments in the letter were “important” and enabled them to “catch” more of what the counselor was trying to say to them. Clients also explained that they “believed more” in what the counselor was communicating in the letter because it reflected counselor thoughtfulness and that it was not expressed “just to make [the client] feel better.” In addition, clients were able to re-read the letter multiple times which aided with interpretation and the discovery of new insights. Being able to read the counselor’s words in a letter also aided with memory and retention of content from previous counseling sessions. Clients reported increased ability to extend the counseling experience into their “day to day” lives. These viewpoints foster therapeutic possibilities with respect to supplementing client experience with a counseling letter between appointments.
Clients do not receive counseling services in a vacuum. The counseling letter aided the clients in being able to communicate their experience to significant others in their lives. Clients noted feelings of excitement to share the letter with others and reported that it felt “nice” to have their struggles understood by others, in addition to their counselor.

Specific experiences were shared by clients with respect to their perceptions about the letter’s influence in their lives and the counseling experience. Clients appeared to be influenced by the counselor’s honesty and openness with respect to disclosing positive feelings toward the client about key areas of self identity. Counselor feedback in letter form was often viewed as being more meaningful by clients due to perceived counselor thoughtfulness and use of personal time and energy. The viewpoints of clients in this study also suggest that the letter influences client perceptions of caring in the relationship and fosters the development of increased trust. In the experiences of the clients in this study, perceived counselor trustworthiness often led to an increased willingness to talk about previously undisclosed aspects of experience at greater depth.

**Communicating to clients through letters.** Clients noted the positive impact of receiving their counselor’s thinking about them in the letter and described the counselor’s disclosure of personal feelings relative to the client’s experience as being important. An important question that letter writing begs of the counselor when communicating to clients is, “How am I thinking about this client and their problems and how do I want to talk about this with the client?” Clients noted the significance of counselor language which oftentimes aided with understanding and was noted by the participants in this
study as being a helpful factor in the overall experience. Letter writing with clients additionally draws attention to counselor sensitivity with respect to the language practices they employ with clients in face-to-face meetings.

Additionally, the use of a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter may encourage counselors to be increasingly mindful of their experience with respect to the client’s story of self. The reflective nature of letter writing may support counselors in being aware of any transference feelings that could obscure his or her ability to accurately empathize with client concerns.

**Counselor reflections on writing to clients.** The counselors who participated in this study informally described the experience of writing to clients as being “helpful” for them with respect to being able to think about their client “more deeply” outside of the counseling appointments. The counselors in this study described investing time in order to support the client through a letter. The experience was described as being “challenging” and “positive.” Both counselors reported that they “enjoyed” the experience of supporting clients through letter writing adjacent to counseling appointments. Counselors also noted that the letter gave them the opportunity to share information that they had not been able to share in previous sessions, such as the way they were thinking or feeling about particular client issues. The counselors in the study noted that writing to clients in a letter also enabled them to develop increased feelings of understanding about client problems and communicating this in a letter felt “good” and “natural.” Both of the participating counselors in this study talked about their continued interest in using therapeutic letters with clients in the future.
Recommendations for using counseling letters with clients. It should also be noted that I have been writing counseling letters of this nature to clients for the past six years under supervision. It is recommended that counselors seek supervision when writing letters to clients in order to ensure adherence to professional and ethical standards of counseling practice and to provide the best possible care for clients. Counselors should carefully consider their relationships with their clients and the nature of their concerns and ask the following question, “Can this client benefit from receiving this type of counseling letter and if so, how and what should I say in the letter so that the client can use it in helpful ways in his or her life outside of counseling?”

Counselors should also discuss at length with clients the use of letters in counseling and receive both verbal and written client consent before writing to clients. Confidentiality should also be discussed with clients with respect to how they would like to receive the letter. In some instances, clients are more comfortable with the letter being hand-delivered during a counseling session in order to ensure that the letter would not be opened by anyone else. This study investigated client experiences of receiving letters that were mailed to them and received outside of the counseling session. Clients noted varied emotional responses to the experience of receiving the letter outside of the counseling appointment, including feelings of “anticipation,” “nervousness,” and “excitement.”

Letter Writing and Counselor Education

Several implications for counselor education can also be found as a result of the viewpoints discovered through this current investigation. These are discussed below.
Letter writing and counselor focus on client concerns. A primary component of counselor education is facilitating the personal and professional development of students who are interested in entering the helping profession (Elkins, 2009; Pipher, 2003; Rossiter, 1976; Whitton, 2003; Yalom, 2002). Counselor development can often be an ambiguous process with respect to the development of knowledge, skills, and awareness necessary for providing effective therapy (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 1997). In the beginning of their development, counseling students are often self-focused and as a consequence, experience on a continuum a range of difficulty regarding awareness of client concerns (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 1997). The primary focus is often on how the client is thinking about the counselor and perceived inadequacies of self or a view of self as incompetent or unhelpful when working with clients. In the experiences of this research, it appeared that the use of letters aided both the counselor and client in being mutually reflective about client concerns and the nature of the counseling relationship. Taking time to think about the client and their experience aided counselors in gaining a richer understanding of client struggles. The letter provided a medium for the counselor to communicate his or her empathic attunement for the client’s experience. The participants in this study described a shared experience of feeling “understood” by their counselor after reading the letter. One participant described the letter as feeling “like empathy.”

Humanistic counseling letters and the facilitative relationship. As a counselor educator, I was also interested in the question, “How is a facilitative relationship taught to counseling students?” Although this investigation does not contain clear answers to this
question, it contributes on some levels to the discussion. Letter writing is reflective of relationally responsive practice (Myers, 2003; Shotter, 1993), in that it is an extension of the counselor’s interest in being intentional about the development of a particular type of facilitative relationship with the client. In the case of this research, letters enabled increased counselor reflectiveness about the relational space shared between client and counselor and fostered the development of client perceptions of increased trustworthiness and counselor caring that aided clients in feeling more comfortable to “open up more” with their counselor. Clients often noted increased feelings of “connection” and “bonding” and viewed the letter as having a positive impact on the counseling alliance.

It also appeared that this theoretical style of letter writing contributed both directly and indirectly in the clients’ experiences of Rogers’ (1980) core conditions for a facilitative therapeutic experience: (a) perception of counselor genuineness (e.g., “How could he care for so many people? But maybe he does. Like how does he care for so many people, or is it just a talk they learn to say? It communicated that he really does care about me.”); (b) perception of unconditional positive regard (e.g., “I really think I could tell him more, and he wouldn’t judge me. It makes everything okay to tell him. I finally realized, ‘He’s here to help me. He’s not here to make me feel like a crazy. I don’t need to lie.’”); and (c) perception of empathy (e.g., “It made me feel good, as if somebody is hearing me and feeling how I feel inside.”). Encouraging counseling students to utilize the use of counseling letters under supervision with clients appears to be a facilitative activity that can encourage the continued development of attitudes that are conducive of a helping relationship.
Teaching letter writing: Questions. So many questions came up with respect to “teaching” letter writing to beginning counselors or professional counselors that are new to the craft. How do supervisors and/or counselor educators teach students about relational tone and sensitivity? In what ways do educators support the development of beginning counselors’ writing voices and help them maintain their authenticity in the letter while preserving the tone of their experience of the counseling relationship? What are helpful practices counselor educators and clinical supervisors can employ when supporting counselors as they attempt to create a therapeutically helpful letter for client experience? How is learning to be in relationship with a client in a counseling appointment different and/or similar to learning how to relate to clients through a counseling letter? In what ways do the letters that students or counselors write to their clients change, stylistically, over time? It is hoped that this current investigation can engender additional interest for counselor educators and counseling supervisors to consider such questions.

Application of humanistic letters in educational or supervisory relationships. Even though the parameters for this investigation were concerned primarily with client experiences of counseling letters, it seems appropriate to consider ways in which letter writing could be utilized in counselor education. One of the primary features of a humanistically-oriented letter is to aid another with the experience of a particular type of relational context that can be facilitative of personal growth. One possible educational context would be a counseling supervisor who chooses to write a humanistically-oriented letter to a supervisee in order to help him or her develop increased feelings of
competence and confidence as a new practitioner and to support him or her with clinical setbacks. Another example would be a counselor educator writing a humanistic letter to a student to acknowledge personal growth in an assignment or classroom activity or to support a student with a personal challenge she or he is facing that is impacting academic performance. Letters could additionally be used in mentoring or advisory relationships to support students with an academic project or in making a difficult decision with respect to their professional future. This type of relatedness might also provide opportunities for counselor educators and clinical supervisors to model certain facilitative attitudes with students in order to provide an example of relationship that could be transferred into the counseling student’s clinical work with clients.

Summary

It is noted that these suggestions are speculative from the perspective of the researcher in this study and are presented here for consideration. It was apparent through the experiences of the six participants in this study that the letters were collectively viewed as being helpful relative to clients’ concerns about themselves and their beliefs about their counselor and the counseling relationship. It is hoped that these viewpoints can encourage conversations about the helpful aspects and potential drawbacks of relationship-oriented letters in clinical and educational contexts.

Implications for Future Research and Education

This research was conducted in part as a response to Ms. Moules’ (2000) recommendation to extend the qualitative conversation regarding the impact of therapeutic letters into the mental health context and to explore clients’ viewpoints
concerning the meaning(s) of receiving a letter from their therapist between appointments. It is hoped that additional qualitative research will be considered with respect to counseling letters in a variety of therapeutic contexts in the mental health profession, including drug and alcohol treatment, adolescent populations, college counseling centers, and inpatient or residential treatment facilities. I recommend that future investigations be conducted that explore the impact of counseling letters with client populations dealing with specific problems of living, such as eating disorders, addictions, career indecision, transition, and chronic pain.

This research highlights the continuation of the complexity of therapeutic relatedness through the medium of letter writing between counseling sessions. It is hoped that the findings from this current investigation add to the already existing dialogue concerning the therapeutic utility of a particular genre of therapeutic letter in a specific time and setting. I acknowledge that the helpful ingredients of a counseling letter are subjective and vary on a client to client basis. The examples of the letters in this study highlight the complicated nature of relationships and yet also point to the intimacies that can be felt when certain conditions are experienced in a letter, such as caring, listening, and understanding.

**Being With the Counselor Without the Counselor Present**

One example of an individual viewpoint suggested in this research containing possibilities for future research is found in Linda’s experience of being able to cry while reading the letter. She explained difficulties with the grief process due to feeling “bottled-up” but advised that reading her counselor’s comments about this aspect of her
experience in the letter helped her to cry several times. She explained, “Nobody saw me crying because I was in my own place.” One research possibility would be to explore client perceptions of being with his or her counselor in the context of a face-to-face encounter versus receiving counselor feedback in a letter. A question asked in response to this viewpoint was, “What is the therapeutic significance of experiencing counselor feedback in the client’s ‘own place’?”

**Client Experiences of Therapist Transparency in the Counseling Letter**

This research also is suggestive of the complexities concerned with language. Dawson and Dawson (1909) noted that the writer’s ability to “unlock” his or her “heart” influences the capacity to evoke a particular response in the reader. It appeared that counselor transparency was valued by the participants in this inquiry. Jourard (1971) encouraged counselors to utilize self-disclosure in the counseling relationship to support clients in achieving awareness about themselves in relationship to another (e.g., the counselor). Yalom (2002) additionally discussed the importance of transparency on the part of the counselor to aid client experiences. The participants in this study noted instances in which the counselor revealed his or her feelings about a particular issue the client had been struggling with in their lives. Counselor disclosure in the letter appeared to be valued by the participants due to the fact that it often contained an aspect of how the counselor saw and experienced the client in addition to the way in which the client influenced or touched the counselor’s life. Some questions asked with respect to counselor transparency in a letter are: (a) What is the significance of counselor transparency in a letter versus a face to face session? (b) Do counselors feel more
comfortable disclosing themselves to a client in a letter than when they are meeting in
person with a client? (c) What types of transparency in a letter are consistently viewed by
clients as being therapeutically helpful? and (d) How does the perceived significance of
counselor self-disclosure in a letter vary depending on the rapport that exists in the
relationship?

Future research needs to look at what forms of counselor expressions from an
“unlocked heart” are perceived as being helpful in client experience. Future inquiries in
this area should pay special attention to the length of time the counselor and client have
been in a counseling relationship together with respect to the types of disclosures being
expressed by the counselor in the letter.

**Significance of Counselor Language Practices in Clients’ Experiences**

Language can be a clumsy tool that reflects both the noblest hopes for connection
and yet simultaneously can be accompanied by the awareness of one’s isolation. In many
instances, the participants in this study highlighted the significance of the counselor’s use
of language in the letter. Clients often noted the counselor’s use of verbatim client
disclosures in session in the context of the letter as being important with respect to
increased awareness. It also appeared that certain aspects of the letter were less attended
to whereas other parts of the letter were highlighted and given special attention by clients.
A possible direction for future research would be to explore counselor language that
clients perceive as encouraging or helpful versus communications that are experienced as
detracting or nonaffirming.
**Research Methodology Considerations**

The use of a case study was considered in order to explore one client’s experience of receiving several humanistic counseling letters over the course of the counseling relationship (Yalom & Elkin, 1974). Due to time constraints and academic goals, the decision was made to speak with multiple participants about their experience of receiving one counseling letter instead of multiple letters.

An additional direction for future research would be to explore the experiences of counselors who write a humanistically-oriented letter(s) to clients between counseling sessions. It was apparent from informal discussions with the counselors in this study that their experiences of writing to clients were impactful and positive. They noted increased feelings of connection and empathy for their clients and described an increased desire to use letter writing in the future. Research that explores counselor experiences of writing to clients could be added to the literature concerning the use of relational counseling letters in clinical practice.

It is also hoped that future research can incorporate multiple voices with respect to demographics, gender, and diversity. It is noted that this current study included six Caucasian female voices from varying socio-economic backgrounds with different life contexts due to age and environmental factors. It is suggested that future research explore the impact of a humanistic counseling letter in the lives of clients from dissimilar racial and ethnic backgrounds and that also include additional gendered voices such as male and transgender.
**Frequency, Timing, and Delivery of Counseling Letters**

Two of the participants in this study suggested that receiving more than one counseling letter from their counselor would be viewed as helpful. In addition, one participant commented on the timing of letters, suggesting that receiving a letter from her counselor “once every four months” would be helpful. It is suggested that future research explore the experience of client(s) who receive multiple letters from their counselor in order to understand client viewpoints concerning the impact of receiving more than one counseling letter over the course of the therapy experience. In addition, exploring clients’ perspectives concerning the impact of counseling letters that are provided by their counselors at varying intervals with respect to time is also encouraged.

This study contained six participants that had been meeting with their counselor for varied amounts of time. Three participants had met with their counselor for over a year, and the other three had been meeting with their counselor for only a few months before receiving the counseling letter. Future research could examine clients’ experiences of receiving a counseling letter during the initial stages of counseling and comparing this to clients that receive an initial counseling letter after significant rapport has been established.

Another possible direction for research would be to explore the impact of the counseling letter when it is provided to clients by the counselor during a counseling appointment instead of sending the letter to clients by mail between sessions. Participants in this current investigation described the experience of receiving the letter in the mail as significant and noted varied emotional responses.
Shifting Client Perceptions of Therapeutic Boundaries: Exploring Concerns

Relational themes were a significant contribution of this present investigation. A particular theme expressed by the six participants in this study was the impact of the counseling letter on their perception of the counselor and the therapeutic relationship. In all cases, each client expressed the notion of “friendship.” This description appeared to be important for each client in this study. One potential direction for future research would be to explore client perceptions regarding the importance of being able to view the counselor as “friend-like” or to detect characteristics of friendship in the counseling alliance. How is the experience of “friendship” in the counseling relationship additive or in some cases detracting in client experience? How does a letter sent from the counselor to a client contribute to this shift via the client’s perspective? Finally, what are the qualities of a counseling letter that are perceived by clients as an extension of friendship? The researcher in this study noticed that this shift also appeared to be suggestive of perceived power differences or role expectations in the relationship, where previous to the reception of the letter, clients did not feel comfortable disclosing certain aspects of their experience, were unsure about providing their counselor with feedback, and “didn’t think” they could ask their counselor about how he or she saw them. After receipt of the letter, clients noted increased feelings of “comfort” and the ability to “talk about anything” with the counselor. Exploring the significance of these relational shifts with respect to clients’ experiences of counseling letters could be beneficial.
Researcher Reflection: Inside, Outside, Outside, Inside

Her body was rounded like earth. Stories. Breath. . . .
Her eyes have been painted closed. I understand.
To tell a story you must travel inward. (T. T. Williams, 1983, 129)

As a counselor and beginning counselor educator who has encountered a variety
of clinical and educational contexts, concerns about relationship and how to foster a
relational experience that aids with personal growth and learning has become a primary
interest of mine over time. I have been increasingly curious about ways of becoming
more intentional about how to facilitate relationships with students and clients that can be
used by the learner in a constructive and positive way to aid with their personal and/or
professional goals. I have additionally been interested in reflective practice, both in my
private life and in the professional contexts I have been a part of, and letters have given
me a comfortable means in which to develop this reflective practice.

I began writing letters to clients during my family practicum while working with a
couple that I felt stuck with and unable to help. My supervisor at the time encouraged me
to consider reading about Narrative Therapy and the work being done with couples. He
also suggested that I think about writing a letter to the couple in order to share some of
my concerns about the work we were doing together. I was excited and appreciated his
support. He aided me in writing a brief letter to the couple, and at the time, I remember
feeling nervous to give the letter to them. My anxiety was a response to feeling unsure
about how the clients would receive or interpret the letter and also due to the novelty of
the experience. They returned for the next session and explained that the letter had
helped them to consider “a new perspective” that they had previously been unable to find
during our work together. I continued to work with several couples and families over the
course of my internship and wrote letters periodically to clients to support them with their
counseling experiences. While I noticed the letters as being a helpful component of the
therapy experience, I was never able to obtain a detailed and descriptive sense as to
“how” the letters were viewed by clients in their lives.

I continued to write letters to clients although my writing style and tone began to
change and become more reflective of a humanistic approach. I began to employ a
heavier use of counselor disclosure with respect to how I viewed client concerns and the
impact of client disclosure on myself and also attempted to intentionally point clients
again and again to an experience of themselves through language. Clients continue to
comment on the letter being a significant part of their counseling experience and
oftentimes described feelings of caring and an increased investment to continue working
in counseling. I viewed my dissertation as an opportunity to explore this in greater depth
and viewed it as a project that would be meaningful enough to carry me through some of
the setbacks I anticipated with such an undertaking.

The results expressed via participant viewpoints concerning their experiences of
receiving a counseling letter from their therapist between sessions were meaningful and
aided me in thinking more deeply about the “how” and the “why” of the letter through the
eyes of the clients who graciously gave of their time and trust by talking with me about
their experiences, which were intimate and personal. I was equally touched by the
counselors who chose to support me by asking some of their clients to participate in the
study. I was impressed with their courage to ask. I also learned from them about writing
to clients and appreciated their dedication and concern for helping their clients live meaningfully through problems of living. Their letters were a reflection of an already existing deep sense of caring they felt toward each of their clients, both those in the study and I am sure those that did not participate as well.

The process of synthesizing the various viewpoints into categories or themes was oftentimes daunting and often produced confusing and discouraging feelings. It was important to embody and communicate the lived experiences of the participants who received a counseling letter in this research. I am hopeful that their voices can be felt and heard within the margins of this investigation and that they can deepen the already existing conversation concerning therapeutic letter writing as an adjunct to the counseling experience. It is additionally hoped that the six individuals that participated in this study can continue to use this experience in their lives as they engage with the challenges, joys, and uncertainties that lie ahead. I feel optimistic when I think about them “looking back” at a snapshot of self and self-experience preserved by a letter in order to tell a new story of the landscape that is them.

**Summary**

This chapter discussed the findings of the current phenomenological inquiry regarding clients’ experiences relative to receiving a counseling letter from their therapist between counseling appointments. This chapter also provided the reader with recommendations for future research relative to the field of letter writing in counseling practice. Suggestions were also presented with respect to areas of application for the counseling profession and counselor education. A phenomenological methodology was
employed in order to understand the viewpoints of clients experiencing a counseling letter from their therapist, and several common experiences were discovered. This shared experience consisted of five primary themes that aid with understanding the participants’ experiences as a whole. These themes are:

(a) Ability to re-read counselor communications in letter form increases client reflectiveness, is more “catch-able,” and is viewed as meaningful; (b) The letter had a positive impact on client experiences of the counselor and the counseling relationship; (c) Obtaining counselor perceptions of the client in a letter was noted as surprising and evoked new feelings and thoughts about the self; (d) Letter was viewed as gift-like and preservable for future use; and (e) Desire to share the letter with close others in order to be understood.

A descriptive synthesis of the shared aspects of participants’ experiences was developed. In addition, participants also described unique viewpoints regarding the experience of the phenomenon that were not shared by the majority of group members. These viewpoints were also discussed. Participants’ viewpoints concerning the experience of the counseling letter were informed by the nature of the client’s relationship with self and with the counselor and the capacity for the letter to engender increased reflectiveness toward the self and their relationship with the counselor. Client perceptions of self, of the counselor, the counselor’s thinking about the client, and the confidence to disclose aspects of self and continue working in the counseling relationship were highlighted as significant aspects of participant experience.
It is recommended that future qualitative studies be conducted with respect to client experiences of counseling letters in order to understand how counseling letters can facilitate client well-being and enhance the overall experience of the counseling process.

The phenomenological method employed in this experience was both comfortable and challenging. It was often difficult to separate researcher beliefs and expectations while reading the client interviews in order to uncover a general structure of the experiences representative of the group as a whole. At times, I noticed my biases bleeding into the methodological process. I was grateful for the constant and dedicated assistance of my peer reviewer and research team. Their assistance, in addition to reflective journaling and memoing, aided in applying the epoché process throughout the duration of this inquiry. The conversations with participants were a meaningful aspect of this research and enabled me to use my counseling skills in order to grasp the participants’ viewpoints relative to their experience of the phenomenon. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to spend time with this subject and to hopefully add to the existing literature concerning clients’ experiences of counseling letters during the therapeutic process.
APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT
Appendix A

Recruitment Script

You are invited to participate in a research opportunity that explores the experiences of clients who receive a counseling letter from their therapist between counseling sessions. This research is being conducted to investigate the perceived helpfulness of counseling letters to support client well being during the therapy experience.

The researcher for this investigation is Logan Lamprecht, who is currently a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Kent State University. He is a professional counselor in the state of Ohio and has used counseling letters with clients to support their well being. This study is a reflection of his interests in the counselor-client relationship and the use of creative methods to address the highly personal nature of the counseling experience and to aid clients in achieving therapeutic goals.

Mr. Lamprecht has asked two counselors to assist in this research by extending an invitation to clients to receive a counseling letter over the course of their therapy experience and to talk about this experience in some detail with Mr. Lamprecht in the form of two formal 20 to 40 minute interviews. Each interview is audio-taped for the purpose of transcription and analysis. Participant confidentiality is an integral part of this research process, and Mr. Lamprecht will strive to ensure that your identity is not revealed over the course of the research process. Pseudonyms will be used, and any identifying information will be omitted in order to preserve participant anonymity. Audio-recordings of each interview will be erased after each transcription is completed. Mr. Lamprecht will not have access to client records. In addition, the counselors in this study will compose the counseling letter and provide it to each participating client. Mr. Lamprecht will assist the counselors in the composition of each counseling letter in order to ensure consistency in the study.

If you are willing to help in this study, please carefully review and sign the “Consent to Participate” form and the accompanying “Release of Information for Participation in Research” form. This form enables the counselor to provide your contact information to Mr. Lamprecht so that he can arrange an initial meeting with you to discuss the study in further detail and to answer any questions you might have regarding your participation. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Your experiences are valued in this research experience. It is hoped that through this investigation, each client-participant can receive some therapeutic benefit from receiving a counseling letter between counseling sessions and that this benefit can be captured and rendered in this investigation. To thank each participant in this study, at the conclusion of the interviews, a $30.00 gift card will be provided to each participant.

Thank you for considering participating in this study. Your willingness to be a part of this research assists in giving attention to client perspectives concerning the impact of counseling letters in the therapeutic experience.
APPENDIX B

CLIENT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE FORM
Appendix B

Client Consent to Participate Form

Dear ___________________,

My name is Logan Lamprecht, and I am a licensed Professional Counselor (PC) in Ohio and a doctoral candidate in the Counseling and Human Development Services Program at Kent State University. The focus of my doctoral dissertation is on client perspectives concerning their experiences of receiving a therapeutic letter from their counselor between counseling sessions. I am interested in exploring this topic for several reasons. First, there is little research concerning the use of letters with clients during counseling. Second, the research that does exist does not incorporate the stories of clients who receive these letters during their counseling experience. Third, I am interested in collecting viewpoints from clients concerning the impact of these letters on their overall well-being.

I would like you to take part in this project. Your counselor has been asked by me to invite you to participate in this study. Your participation will be completely voluntary and if you choose not to participate, this will not impact your counseling service in any way. If you decide to participate and then later choose to withdraw, this will not be held against you either. If you decide to participate, your participation will require you to (a) supply all requested information on the “Participant Demographic Form,” (b) complete and sign the necessary paperwork, including consent forms, described below, (c) be willing to receive a minimum of one counseling letter from your therapist in the mail between counseling sessions, and (d) consent for two confidential audio-taped interviews with me to discuss your experiences of receiving the counseling letter.

The first audio-taped interview will last between 25 and 40 minutes. During this interview, you will be asked a series of open-ended questions, including the primary research question, “What is your experience of receiving a letter from your counselor between counseling sessions?” Upon completion of the transcription of the initial interview, the digital recording of the interview will be erased to ensure confidentiality, and a copy of the transcribed interview will be provided to you. A 20 to 30 minute follow-up interview will be scheduled to discuss the accuracy of the transcript and findings from the initial interview and to get any additional information that might have been left out or unclear from the first research interview. During this follow-up interview, my primary concern is to make sure that the analysis that I have conducted on your interview accurately represents what you remember about your experience. An example of a question I might ask during this interview is, “Does what I have found
match your experience of receiving a counseling letter during therapy?” Any changes or additions you include in this interview will be added into the final analysis.

All the information you provide will be held in the strictest confidence. Storage and handling of your personal information, including the demographic form, transcribed interviews, and informed consent paperwork will be held in the strictest of confidence and in a confidential location with access only to the researcher. Your personal identity will not be discerned from the information you provide, and a pseudonym will be used to conceal your identity. Your responses will be assigned a code that only I will be able to link to your actual identity. Your identity will not be revealed from subsequent disclosure of the study results by the researcher in the interest of science or research. For the purposes of research and dissemination of findings, the transcripts and analysis will be kept and maintained confidentially by the researcher.

If you are willing to help with this study, please carefully review and complete and sign the “Release of Information for Participation in Research Form” and “Consent Form.” Also complete the “Participant Demographic Form” for initial contact with the researcher. Upon receipt of your signed consent and “Release of Information for Participation in Research Form,” you will be contacted by the researcher regarding the subsequent steps to be taken. Please feel free to contact me prior to your consent with any questions you might have.

If you want to know more about this research, please call me at (208) 339-1279 or llamprec@kent.edu, or you may contact my dissertation co-directors, Dr. Marty Jencius or Dr. Donald Bubenzer in 310 White Hall of Kent State University at (330) 672-2662.

This project has been approved by Kent State University Institutional Review Board for Research of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about Kent State University’s rules for research, please contact Dr. Sonia Alemagno, Interim Vice President for Research, Division of Research and Graduate Studies (Tel. 330-672-3012). You will get a copy of this form.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration for participation in this study. Your willingness to participate in this research and lend your voice concerning the impact of counseling letters in your own experience will assist greatly in giving increased attention to the use of therapeutic letters to support client well-being.

Appreciatively,

Logan M. Lamprecht, PC, NCC, M. Counseling
Doctoral Candidate
Counseling and Human Development Services
Kent State University
(208) 339-1279 / llamprec@kent.edu
Consent Form (Client-Participant)

Consent Statement:

I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

I agree to take part in this research, and I understand what my participation will entail. I also understand that I can stop at any time without any penalty.

____________________________________  ________________________
Participant Signature                        Date

____________________________________  ________________________
Witness Signature                            Date
Appendix C

Participant Demographic Form

Note: This demographic form is intended to gather some information about you. Please respond to as many of the items below that you are able. All information will remain confidential, and you will receive a pseudonym so that your identity is not revealed in this study. Some of your responses might be explored in the initial interview. If you have any questions about this form, please contact me at 208-339-1279 or llamprec@kent.edu.

Date Completed: _________________.

Name: __________________________________.

Age: _________________________.

Gender: Female _______. Male _______. Other _________.

Ethnic/Racial Identity: _________________________.

Employment (if any): _________________________.

Setting receiving counseling services in: _________________________.

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APPENDIX D

RELEASE OF INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH FORM
Appendix D

Release of Information for Participation in Research Form

_______________________, give consent to, ______________________, to release
(client name)                                                 (counselor name)

the contact information I have provided below to Logan Lamprecht (PC) for the purposes
of being contacted about participation in this study about my experiences of receiving a
therapeutic letter from my counselor during the counseling process. I understand that my
contact information will be limited to my name, phone number, and/or email and times
that I provide that are best for me to be reached at. I also understand that my contact
information will only be shared with Mr. Lamprecht (PC), as the primary researcher in
this study. I understand that the purpose of this contact will be for the researcher to
arrange an appointment to discuss with me in greater detail the research experience,
including my responsibilities as a participant, to address any questions or concerns that I
have about my participation, and to talk about informed consent and issues of
confidentiality pertaining to this research.

Participant Full Name (Please print): ________________________________________

Participant Phone Number(s): ________________________________________________

Participant Email address: _________________________________________________

Preferred method of contact from the researcher (circle): PHONE EMAIL

Circle days and times when you are most available for phone contact:

<table>
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<th>Mon</th>
<th>Tues</th>
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<th>Thur</th>
<th>Fri</th>
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<td>4p-9p</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_______________________________ ________________
Participant Signature            Date

_______________________________ ________________
Counselor Signature              Date
APPENDIX E

COUNSELOR CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH PROJECT
Appendix E
Counselor Consent Form for Participation in Research Project

Dear ___________________,

Date: __________

Thank you for your willingness to be such an important part of this investigation concerning the use of counseling letters to support client well-being. My name is Logan Lamprecht, and I am a professional counselor (PC) in the state of Ohio. I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Counseling and Human Development Services Program at Kent State University. This particular research topic is an extension of practice that I have used with clients for the past five years: writing therapeutic letters to clients in-between sessions to support them in achieving therapeutic goals and to improve well-being. There is some research that has been conducted regarding the use of therapeutic letters with clients, but there is no academic research that specifically addresses the experience of clients in counseling relationships who receive a humanistically-oriented therapeutic letter from their counselor in-between counseling appointments. My interest in this research experience is in talking with clients who receive a counseling letter from their therapist in order to better understand the letter’s impact.

This consent form, a copy of which has been provided to you, is only a small part of the process of informed consent. My hopes are that this gives you an accurate sense of what this research is concerned with and what your participation, should you consent, would involve. Please take the time to carefully read this letter and if you consent to participate, complete the “Consent Form (Counselor)” along with the “Counselor Demographic Form.” If you have any questions that arise concerning your consent or the research process, please contact me as soon as possible. You will find my contact information at the bottom of this form.

As a counselor in this study, your involvement is an invaluable component of gaining the experiences of clients through the use of therapeutic letters. If you agree to participate in this study, I would ask that you extend an invitation to clients that you are currently meeting with or might potentially meet with for the opportunity to participate in this research study. I will ask that you use your clinical judgment to select clients that you think could potentially benefit from a counseling letter and that might be willing to discuss their experience at some length in an interview format with the researcher. I am asking that clients under the age of 18 as well as any clients that have any mental health diagnosis that might impair their ability to discuss their experience (i.e., a diagnosis of Schizophrenia) be excluded from the potential pool of client-participants for this study. After you have identified clients that are willing to participate in this study, I am asking
that you provide them with the following forms: “Release of Information for Participation in Research Form,” “Consent Form (Client-Participant),” and “Participant Demographic Form.” After the participating client completes these forms, please contact me so that I can obtain the forms and set up an initial appointment with each participant.

Following this meeting and upon receipt of verbal consent in addition to written consent to participate in the research study, I will ask that you compose one therapeutic letter containing humanistic elements for each client involved in the study. This letter would then be provided to the client between counseling sessions. I recognize that I have a primary responsibility to support you in writing a letter that meets the criteria for this research. I think it is important that the content of the letter matches the tone of your personhood and of the relationship you have with each client you will be in a letter-writing relationship with during the counseling experiences. I expect my involvement to be minimal after instructing you beforehand about a few key stylistic components that give a therapeutic letter humanistic features. I would expect to review the initial letter you send to each client-participant in this study to ensure some measure of consistency regarding the tone and theoretical shape of the letter. This will additionally be discussed with each participant during the informed consent process. My hope is that I can be a support to you during this research process and that you will communicate any concerns that might emerge during this experience.

After each research participant receives their first therapeutic letter between counseling sessions, I will need you to contact me as soon as possible to advise me of this occurrence. I will then contact the research participant and arrange an initial interview at a time and confidential setting of their choosing. These interviews will be audio-taped for transcription purposes and after each interview has been transcribed, the recording will be destroyed immediately. In order to preserve the confidentiality of each participant, pseudonyms will replace the actual participant names, and any identifying information will be excluded from the report. There will be an additional follow-up interview to make sure the transcripts and researcher findings were accurate and to terminate the researcher-participant relationship as well as to address any concerns regarding participation.

I want to provide, for your benefit, a brief definition of what I mean by a humanistic experience in counseling, as I see it informing the way in which counselors strive to relate to clients in the counseling alliance and is subsequently reflected in the letters a humanistic counselor might write to a client they are working with. Humanistic counseling is primarily concerned with the establishment of a special kind of relationship, wherein the counselor is primarily concerned with co-creating an environment with the client where the client can feel deeply valued, as a unique individual, and accepted and appreciated without conditions regarding “how one should be or act.” The primary goal is to support individuals into becoming better acquainted with themselves and the discovery of internal resources that can support a person in living a more meaningful and satisfying existence. This approach assumes problems will continue to be encountered,
but through counseling, individuals become better equipped to manage these challenges in ways that lead to continued growth and not to stagnation and despair.

On a personal note, I am thankful for your generosity and interest in choosing to be a therapist for this study. Your role is a vital component to making this research “happen,” and I feel a great deal of honor to work along side you in this endeavor. I recognize, from my own experiences, that counseling relationships are marked by a great deal of excitement and uncertainty. I anticipate that many of the clients you are working with will likely not want to participate in this study, and I appreciate you giving careful consideration to those you think might benefit from this type of therapeutic modality and that might simultaneously be willing to talk about their experiences, confidentially, for the purposes of expanding this research into the counseling profession.

If you would like to know more about this research project, please contact me, Logan Lamprecht, at 208-339-1279. You may additionally contact the advisors for this dissertation, Dr. Donald Bubenzer at 330-672-0790 or Dr. Martin Jencius at 330-672-0713. You will receive a photocopy of your consent form.

This project has been approved by Kent State University Institutional Review Board for Research of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about Kent State University’s rules for research, please contact Dr. Sonia Alemagno, Interim Vice President for Research, Division of Research and Graduate Studies (Tel. 330-672-3012). You will get a copy of this form.

Warmly and in appreciation,

Logan Lamprecht, PC, NCC, M. Counseling
Doctoral Candidate
Counseling and Human Development Services
Kent State University
Kent, OH 44240
llamprec@kent.edu / 208-339-1279
Consent Form (Counselor)

Consent Statement:

I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

I agree to take part in this research, and I understand what my participation will look like. I also understand that I can stop at any time without any penalty.

____________________________________  _____________________
Counselor Signature                      Date

____________________________________  _____________________
Witness Signature                        Date
APPENDIX F

COUNSELOR DEMOGRAPHIC FORM
Appendix F

Counselor Demographic Form

Note: This demographic form is intended to gather some information about you. Please respond to as many of the items below that you are able. All information will remain confidential, and your name will not be used in the study. If you have any questions about this form, please contact me at 208-339-1279 or llamprec@kent.edu.

Date Completed: ________________.

Name: _________________________________.

Age: _________________________________.

Gender: Female _______.     Male _______.    Other ________.

Ethnic/Racial Identity: _________________________

Years of experience as a professional counselor and/or counselor trainee: ____________.

Counseling Philosophy and/or theoretical approach(es): __________________________

_______________________________________________________________________.

Any professional and/or training licenses and if so, please list:

_______________________________________________________________________.
APPENDIX G

CONSENT FOR AUDIO-TAPING AND TRANSCRIPTION AUDIOTAPE/VIDEO

CONSENT FORM
Appendix G

Consent for Audio-Taping and Transcription Audiotape/Video Consent Form

NAME OF STUDY: Client’s Experiences of Humanistic Letter Writing in the Counseling Relationship

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Logan Lamprecht, PC, NCC

I agree to participate in an audio-taped interview about my (the participant) experiences of receiving a therapeutic letter from my counselor between counseling sessions as part of this project and for the purposes of data analysis. I agree that Logan Lamprecht may audio-tape this interview. The date, time and place of the interview will be mutually agreed upon.

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ___________________

I have been told that I have the right to listen to the recording of the interview before it is used. I have decided that I:

_____ want to listen to the recording  _____ do not want to listen to the recording

Sign now below if you do not want to listen to the recording. If you want to listen to the recording, you will be asked to sign after listening to them.

Logan Lamprecht may / may not (circle one) use the audio-tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for:

_____ this research project

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ___________________

Address of Interview: _______________________________________________________

[Stamp: "APPROVED" - JAN 1 2011]
APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW GUIDE
Appendix H

Interview Guide

QUESTIONS

1. What is it like to receive a therapeutic letter from your counselor in-between counseling sessions?

2. Also, describe any experiences that stand out most for you in regards to your experience of the letter you received from your counselor during your counseling experiences.

3. Describe those aspects of your experience of receiving the letter that stand out most for you right now.

4. Talk about how the experience affected you.

5. Can you talk in some detail about the impact of the letter on the work you did or are doing in counseling?

6. How did receiving a letter from your counselor in-between sessions impact other aspects of your life?

7. Describe some of your feelings and thoughts regarding your experience of receiving a letter from your counselor.

8. Describe how you felt at the time of your experience (i.e., opening the letter in the mail, sitting down and reading it for the first time, etc.)?

9. Have you shared all that is most significant in relationship to your experience of receiving a letter from your counselor during your therapeutic experiences?
APPENDIX I

ENDORSEMENT LETTER (COLEMAN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES)
November 15, 2010

Logan Lampsrecht
1054 Munroe Falls
Kent Ohio 44240

Dear Logan,

The Clinical Council of Coleman Professional Services endorses your proposal to conduct research on Clients’ Experiences of Humanistic Letter Writing in the Counseling Relationship. Pending Kent State University IRB approval, you are approved to enlist clients served at Coleman Professional Services in your study.

Congratulations!

Sincerely,

Sandy Myers, LPCC-S
VP of Behavioral Health & Rehabilitation
APPENDIX J

ENDORSEMENT LETTER

(AVENUES OF COUNSELING & MEDIATION, LLC.)
Appendix J

Endorsement Letter (Avenues of Counseling & Mediation LLC)

Avenues of Counseling & Mediation, LLC

To Whom it May Concern:

Logan Lamprecht, PC, NCC, doctoral student with Kent State University, will be conducting a research investigation about the experiences of clients who receive a counseling letter from their therapist between counseling sessions. Tiffany J. Peets, Ph.D., LPCC, an independent contractor at Avenues of Counseling and Mediation, LLC, will be participating as a counselor in the investigation by sending two of her clients a counseling letter. Mr. Lamprecht will be interviewing each client selected about their personal experience in receiving the letter from their therapist, Tiffany Peets.

I hereby give permission for the above to take place at Avenues of Counseling and Mediation,

[Signature]

[Name]

Co-owner
APPENDIX K

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL LETTER
Appendix K

Kent State University IRB Approval Letter

RE: Protocol #11-013 “A Phenomenological Inquiry of Client Experiences of Receiving a Humanistically-Oriented Therapeutic Letter In Between Counseling Sessions from their Counselor”

Hello,

I am pleased to inform you that the Kent State University Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved your Application for Approval to Use Human Research Participants as Level I/Exempt research. This application was approved on January 12, 2011. Your research project involves minimal risk to human subjects and meets the criteria for the following category of exemption under federal regulations:

Exemption 1: Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices.

Exemption 2: Research involving the use of educational tests, surveys, interviews, or observation of public behavior.

Exemption 3: Research involving the use of educational tests, surveys, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior not exempt under category 2, but subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office.

Exemption 4: Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens.

Exemption 5: Research and demonstration projects conducted by or subject to approval of department or agency heads, and which are designated to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine public programs or benefits.

Exemption 6: Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies.

*A copy of the IRB approved consent form is attached to this email. This “stamped” copy is the consent form that you must use for your research participants. It is important for you to also keep an unstamped text copy (i.e., Microsoft Word version) of your consent form for subsequent submissions.

Submission of annual review reports is not required for exempt projects. If any modifications are made in research design, methodology, or procedures that increase the risks to subjects or includes activities that do not fall within the approved exemption category, those modifications must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before
implementation. Please contact the IRB administrator to discuss the changes and whether a new application must be submitted.

Kent State University has a Federal Wide Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP); FWA Number 00001853.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me by phone at 330-672-2704 or by email at Pwashko@kent.edu.

Respectfully,
Paulette Washko | 330.672.2704 | Pwashko@kent.edu | 137 Cartwright Hall
Manager, Research Compliance, Communications and Initiatives
APPENDIX L

METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN
Appendix L

Methodological Design

Step 1. Counselor makes contact with clients and informs them of research opportunity. If client agrees to participate, they are provided with release of information for participation form and asked to complete. Counselor provides this form to researcher, and researcher makes initial contact with client-participant. Initial appointment is arranged to discuss study with participant.

Step 2. During initial, informal meeting with participant, researcher goes over informed consent. Researcher discusses the nature of the study and explains expectations to client-participant concerning their participation in the study. Client-participant completes informed consent and also provides verbal consent to participate. Participant completes demographic form. Participants are advised of two future formal interviews.

Step 3. Counselor informs researcher after counseling letter has been provided to client-participant. Researcher makes contact with participant and schedules first formal interview. Researcher meets with participant before client-participant has opportunity to meet with therapist to discuss letter. Participant completes permission for audio-taping of interview and submits to recorded interview with researcher. Advised of follow-up interview.

Step 4. Researcher transcribes interviews and provides transcribed copy of interview to each participant. Researcher then schedules a follow-up and concluding interview with participant to ensure accuracy of findings. Any additional information obtained from this recorded interview is added into the final analysis.

Step 5. Researcher thanks participant for participation and provides each participant with a thank you letter and a $30.00 monetary gift card. Participants are encouraged to talk about their experiences with their therapist. Final contact is made with each counselor to discuss their experiences of writing a humanistically-oriented counseling letter to their clients during the therapeutic relationship.
APPENDIX M

PROTOCOL FOR PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION PROCESS
## Appendix M

### Protocol for Phenomenological Reduction Process

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<th>Process</th>
<th>Methodological Course of Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listing and preliminary grouping</td>
<td>Expressions related to the experience were listed. Relevant units of meaning were horizontalized by the researcher. Epoche process employed throughout phenomenological reductive process. Memoing, reflective journaling, and consultations with colleague and peer reviewer assisted the researcher in being aware of biases that could impinge on the methodological process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction and elimination</td>
<td>Meaning units or invariant constituents were identified and tested for two criteria: (1) Does it contain an aspect of the experience that is vital for understanding it and (2) Can it be abstracted and labeled by the researcher? As expressions met criteria, they became the horizons used by the researcher to locate unique themes with respect to client experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustering and thematizing invariant constituents</td>
<td>Meaning units or invariant constituents grouped to identified core or primary themes of the experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final identification of invariant constituents</td>
<td>Verify invariant constituents and their corresponding unique theme with participant protocols and eliminate expressions that are not explicitly stated or that are not harmonious with essences of experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Textural Description</td>
<td>Using the verified invariant constituents and corresponding themes to develop a summary of participant experience. Verbatim examples included. Share description with each participant in order to verify accuracy of experience. Integrate any new feedback or changes provided by participants during follow-up contact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Structural Description</td>
<td>Summary reflective of individual textural descriptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite Descriptions</td>
<td>Peer reviewer assists research by providing reflective feedback about the summaries. Composite textural and structural descriptions created representing the group-as-a-whole.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textural-structural synthesis</td>
<td>Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, utilizing the textural and structural narratives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core themes</td>
<td>Identify core themes of participant experience that are descriptive of the underlying essences that constitute the group’s shared experience of the phenomenon of letter writing.</td>
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Dear Dissertation Committee:  

April 11, 2011

I was privileged to act as Logan Lamprecht’s Primary Peer Reviewer for his phenomenological investigation. I worked with Logan during his research process and supported him in talking about his experiences with writing letters to clients. We also spent time discussing the design and implementation of the methodology. I spent time analyzing his transcripts of his interviews with participants. These participants were clients who experienced receiving a letter from their counselor between sessions, especially when a cancellation ensued. In these transcripts, I recorded Logan’s potential biases through his questions and responses to enable bracketing and enhance the rigor of his study. After I made comments on the participant transcripts, we discussed his biases on the phone. This discussion prevented his biases with the topic from tainting the trustworthiness of the outcomes. We also brainstormed potential themes, and I assisted him in making determinations about the core themes used in this study to represent the experiences of clients receiving letters. I supported Logan through multiple phone conversations and email communications as we made decisions about the analysis and themes for this research. I feel confident that Logan has taken necessary steps with me to challenge his assumptions and present the results of his phenomenological investigation by giving voice to the participants’ experiences.

If you have any additional questions about my role in his investigation, please do not hesitate to contact me at your convenience.

Sincerely:

Nicole M. LaSelle, PCC and Licensed School Counselor
Adjunct Instructor
Dayton University
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APPENDIX O

INDIVIDUAL TEXTURAL DESCRIPTIONS
Appendix O

Individual Textural Descriptions

**Individual Textural Description of Charlotte’s Experience of Receiving a Counseling Letter from her Therapist**

The experience of receiving a counseling letter from her therapist for Charlotte was positive and “good.” Charlotte described being in a relationship with her therapist for over two years, which initially began as couples therapy. She discussed how over this time, she has since been divorced and her goals for counseling have shifted toward difficulties with self-esteem and transitioning to a “new beginning” in her life as a mother and person. Charlotte described a “close” and “comfortable” relationship with her therapist and reports “really enjoying” meeting with her on an ongoing and frequent basis. Charlotte described several aspects of her experience of receiving a counseling letter from her therapist that were significant from her viewpoint. Charlotte initially described assumptions concerning the experience of getting a letter from her counselor, advising, “I did expect some negativity in the letter. I thought for sure my counselor was going to write more about what I need to work on . . . I guess you could say, negative things.” Charlotte described being “curious” of what her counselor would say to her in the letter because of “not knowing how my counselor sees me.” She explained that when she got the letter and read it, she noticed that it was “very positive . . . and uplifting” and this was described as “significant” for Charlotte due to expectations of having a “negative” experience. Charlotte advised that she was “impressed” with how her counselor views her, explaining, “I’ve never asked my counselor how she sees me.” She described feelings of being “taken by surprise” at how her counselor viewed her, “Why does she see me that way?” Charlotte described feelings of low self-esteem, particularly around the issue of her perception of her intelligence, advising she has struggled for a long time with perceived inadequacies of self, viewing herself as “dumb . . . and stupid” due to a history of interpersonal experiences that have “made” her feel this way, including negative experiences with her family of origin. Hearing her counselor’s perception of her (Charlotte) as being “intelligent” was a “surprising” experience and one that “made” Charlotte feel “good” about herself. Charlotte described the experience, “Oh! It threw me for a loop. Oh! Wow! It did take me by surprise.” Charlotte went on to suggest that this experience supported her in wanting to believe more fully in herself. Charlotte explained that receiving this feedback in the letter was more salient due to fact that she believed she has heard her counselor suggest this before in a counseling session. Charlotte described “looking” at the feedback “differently” because it felt “more personal” to see it in writing, advising, “It meant more to me in a letter to see it written down . . . it’s like she really means it. It is more meaningful.” She later explained, “. . . anybody could say, ‘Oh, you know, you’re not dumb, you’re smart.’ You know, they’re just saying it to, um, please me. But to see it written down, to me, right now, it felt more meaningful. I think the way people say you are smart, but if they say you’re not dumb, you’re smart, it’s like, there’s no meaning behind it, but when I
read it here, it’s like, “Wow! She sees something in me that I might not see in myself.” Charlotte reiterated throughout the interview her experience of feeling “wowed” by her counselor in the letter, which she later described as “surprise . . . excitement . . . and positive.” Charlotte described a personal preference for writing in her own personal life, advising that she is able to connect with others through the process of writing and receiving letters. Charlotte frequently returned to the experience of receiving her counselor’s perspective about her and the concerns she is going through and discussing in the counseling relationship. Charlotte described how it was important that her counselor wrote in the letter about how she notices Charlotte “struggling to feel smart enough” and suggested that it felt “good” to have her counselor “notice” how she “struggles” with particular issues. Charlotte described this as feeling “understood” and appreciated this experience. Charlotte also described how in a few instances in the letter, her counselor spoke about areas that continue to be challenging for her such as her experience of her children becoming adults and how this will impact Charlotte as she makes adjustments as a mother. Charlotte described “re-reading this part a few times,” explaining that she “thought about it a lot.” Charlotte described, “. . . what scares me a little bit about that is being totally alone. I don’t know if I’m going to be alone or not . . . I had to sit there and think . . . will I be alone or less connected, and you know, I thought maybe a little bit of both.” It was evident in Charlotte’s expressions that she experienced increased insight into this part of her experiencing. Charlotte additionally described the experience of her counselor using the client’s language from a previous session to explore the theme of a “new beginning.” Charlotte explained her experience of reading her counselor talking about her enjoying her “comfortable and colorful life,” “I wasn’t colorful . . . I was too afraid . . . and that was touching . . . it’s a whole new beginning for me . . . colorful . . . I thought, I am going to go there . . . it’s a whole new beginning, and that’s how I looked at it, a colorful life. My life is going to be happy and colorful and good and bad . . . moving forward.” Being able to read this portion of the letter “a few times” supported Charlotte in gaining increased awareness about a therapeutic goal for counseling and how she can move in a positive direction with relation to this goal. Charlotte described increased desire to talk about certain aspects of her experience more fully with her counselor, “I thought, well that’s a good thing to bring up next time with her.” Charlotte described a desire to “re-read the letter” and advised that reading the letter produced positive feelings, “The letter made me feel good about myself . . . I felt very good about myself . . . I felt happy . . . I can walk around with my head higher than before . . . to be proud of myself . . . of who I am . . . the letter had a positive influence on me . . . it was a positive thing toward me.” Charlotte described a desire to share the letter with her daughter, “I asked my daughter, ‘Do you want to read the letter . . . it’s about me . . . don’t you want to hear what she had to say about me?’” Charlotte advised that it was important for her to get her daughter’s opinion about the letter because the letter symbolized to Charlotte how her counselor thinks about and sees her, and Charlotte explained that she was interested if her daughter saw similar positive qualities. Charlotte described being uncertain about how people in her life see her, and the letter supported her in finding the context to ask. Charlotte described “relief” in “not having to wonder” how her counselor thinks about her and explained that the letter helped her see how her counselor “sees me as a person,”
indicating that the letter was a “very personal” experience. Charlotte reiterated several times that the experience of receiving a letter from her counselor supported her in influencing how she feels about her counselor and also how she thinks about the counseling relationship, “I’m relaxed where it’s like talking as friends . . . I don’t feel like a patient . . . I just go in there . . . and don’t feel uncomfortable, where it is like, okay, doctor-patient thing, in and out and that’s it . . . it’s much more, I’m just relaxed . . . it’s like friendship . . . like a friend I haven’t seen in a long time.” This example suggested Charlotte’s changing perception on how she views her counselor and the nature of their relationship as well as her counselor’s feelings about her. Charlotte further suggested, “My counselor sees me more than maybe a patient.” Charlotte explained the importance of wanting to be viewed as “more than maybe a patient” by her counselor, “I want my counselor to see me as more than just a patient . . . ‘Okay I’m a patient, this is what you see, let’s get this over with.’” The experience of her counselor writing a letter to her supported Charlotte in holding the perspective that she is more than a patient to her counselor. Charlotte pointed to additional aspects of the letter that communicated her counselor’s valuing of her, explaining that the length of the letter, “four pages,” and the fact that her counselor hand wrote the letter was also significant, “My counselor took the time and really reflected about me.” Charlotte described receiving the letter as being “personal.” “She took the time and effort . . . it’s personal . . . it means something to me; it means something more...I look at it differently.” Charlotte described feelings of becoming “closer” with her counselor and feeling more “bonded” to her in the relationship. Charlotte explained, “. . . if something should really happen where I really had to get a hold of her, I wouldn’t feel bad . . . she’s there . . . that’s how I see her showing me that with the handwritten letter and how many pages it is.” Charlotte described wanting to save the letter and reflect on it from time to time in order to remember how her counselor sees her.

Charlotte’s experience of receiving a counseling letter contains six core descriptive themes: (a) receiving a letter from my counselor increased feelings of closeness in the relationship, (b) the experience of reading the letter made me feel good about myself and helped me think about some important issues I am dealing with, (c) it was surprising to hear my counselor’s positive perception of me and the things I am going through, (d) it is important for me to hear what others think about me, but sometimes I am afraid to ask for this feedback; the letter helped me in this area, (e) getting my counselor’s feedback in writing feels more personal than hearing it in person, and (f) my counselor views me as a person and not just a patient.
Individual Textural Description of Megan’s Experience of Receiving a Counseling Letter from her Therapist

Megan has been meeting with her therapist for almost two years, explaining that she initially presented for couples therapy and over time, elected to pursue individual therapy with her counselor. Over time, Megan’s goals for counseling have shifted toward gaining insight into her relationship with her boyfriend and helpful ways of coming to terms with the feelings she has in this part of her life. Megan additionally described difficulties with depression and self-esteem.

Megan described not having “any expectations” as to receiving the letter from her counselor, “I didn’t know what she was going to say . . . I didn’t know what to expect . . . I have never gotten anything like this before.” Megan reported feelings of “excitement” and “nervousness” as she anticipated reception of the letter through the mail, “Wow! I am actually getting a letter . . . this is going to be cool.” Megan advised that she didn’t know how her counselor thought about her previous to receiving the letter, “I didn’t know how she perceives me,” advising that previous to the letter, Megan had assumptions about how her counselor thought about her but these assumptions remained unchecked, advising, “Oh, I’m just another client that’s spilling her guts and doesn’t have a happy home life and blah, blah, blah . . . I don’t want to be the whiny 54 year old who, you know, ‘Look at my life!’” Megan described being “surprised” about her counselor’s perception of her as a “person,” advising, “Wow! She gets me! She understood, no ifs, ands, or buts about it . . . she knew exactly what was going on inside me . . . I was shocked that she got me.” This expression tied into a central experience for Megan with respect to her perception of the letter and its impact in her experience, advising that it was important to feel “gotten” by her counselor, or to feel like her counselor “really gets her.” Megan described that having this experience through the letter “made” her “want to go back . . . and talk to her for hours.” Megan advised that the letter produced increased feelings of “liking” her counselor and viewing her counselor as a “girlfriend,” or someone that she can “spill [her] guts to.” Megan spoke often about the experience of feeling surprised while reading the letter because in the letter, she described her counselor as “acting more like a friend.”

Megan additionally described her experience of what it was like to read in the letter that her counselor thinks about her when they are not together, “She thinks of me on the way home . . . it’s like, ‘Don’t think about me . . . drive!’ Wow! She’s thinking about me as she is driving home . . . I just don’t think that I’m that unique of a person . . . I just take myself for granted.” Megan advised that this part of the letter “gave [her] a lot to think about,” advising that the letter supported her in increasing her thoughtfulness about herself and her concerns. Megan also described the impact the letter had on her experience of working toward therapeutic goals, advising, “The letter put me in a direction that I need to talk to her more about a certain issue.” Megan additionally advised that “the letter gave me a lot of insight into myself and into us.” Megan’s perception of the letter was that it had a dual impact, both on herself and personal problems of living as well as on her perception of her relationship with her counselor, advising, “I know we are both on the same track.” Megan described wanting to “thank
her [counselor] profusely” and “feeling very touched” and a desire to “give her [counselor] a hug.” Megan further described increased feelings of being “more open” about difficult issues, confidence that my counselor “won’t judge me,” and disproving her initial assumption about her counselor’s perception of her as being “crazy.” Megan explained, “I feel like I can tell her now and I know I’m going to get a straight answer.” The letter supported Megan in “feeling like there is more to me.” Megan explained that it was important for her that her counselor viewed her as a “person . . . as a human being,” and the letter supported her in perceiving that her counselor views her this way in the relationship. Megan also described that it was significant to be able to have an impact on her counselor, “To hear she cherishes me . . . to hear her say I’m teaching her something . . . It’s nice to know I can influence her . . . I’ve taught her something! How could that possibly be?”

Megan additionally described the importance of her counselor being transparent, advising, “She doesn’t really bring in her emotions . . . I was shocked she opened herself up and told me the things she did . . . she gave a little bit of herself [in the letter].” For Megan, this aspect of the experience aided her in feeling like her underneath the role of counselor, there was a person who was really concerned and interested with Megan and the issues she was going through in her life. Megan described increased feelings of being “more comfortable” to tell her counselor “anything.” Megan described this as having an impact on the counseling relationship and her ability to relate to her counselor.

Megan described positive feelings as a result of reading the letter from her counseling, advising feelings of being “happy,” feeling “surprised” and “shocked,” and being “made” to “feel a lot better than [she] did before [the letter].” Megan advised that the letter helped her see that her counselor has a “opinion of [her] that is higher than what [she] would give to [her]self.” She further added, “To have someone else think highly of me extends the camaraderie we share.” It was apparent that receiving her counselor’s positive perception of her had a significant impact on the feelings of relatedness in the counseling alliance.

Megan’s experience of receiving a counseling letter contains seven core descriptive themes: (a) the experience of feeling “gotten” or understood by her counselor, (b) the experience of being unsure as to how her counselor viewed her previous to the experience of the letter, (c) the importance of her counselor being “open” with her and sharing some of herself in the letter, (d) experience of positive feelings as a result of reading the letter, (e) increased desire to be more open in the counseling relationship, (f) experience of viewing the counseling relationship as having qualities of friendship, and (g) experience of being supported to continue to address counseling goals.
Individual Textural Description of Linda’s Experience of Receiving a Counseling Letter from her Therapist

Linda began meeting with her counselor at a community mental health agency several weeks ago. Linda explained to the researcher that her goals for counseling were to address problems related to depression and to improve her self-esteem. Linda also stated that she was also attempting to address difficulties related to grief and loss issues stemming back several years.

Linda described that she initially perceived a “negative” experience when she received the letter, “When I first got the letter, I thought they were like suspending my sessions.” Linda further described that she held assumptions about what would be in the letter, “I just pretty much thought that he would write that, okay, Linda goes to counseling and this is what we went over and this is what she still needs to do.” Linda described feeling “surprised” at what was actually in the letter, “I didn’t expect him to write some of the stuff that he wrote . . . like I had self-esteem . . . surprising to find positive things. The first time I read it, I think I was like not quite sure I was reading what I was reading.” Linda described, “How could somebody write something so nice . . . nobody ever said any positive stuff to me in my life . . . it was very positive . . . I was amazed at actually what he wrote.” Linda described the letter as meaning “a lot” to her. Linda described that her initial experience upon reading through the letter was that it evoked a response of crying. “After I read the letter, I mean the first couple of sentences, I just started crying . . . each time I read the letter, I cried . . . like the first paragraph I cried . . . I don’t know the reason I cried when I read the letter. It felt good to cry. But why did I cry four times . . . the letter helped me...because I still continued to cry.” Linda described knowing that she “needed to cry” before she had received the letter but had felt “too bottled up inside.” Linda advised that the experience of crying was an important step to helping her address “her grieving.” The letter afforded “privacy” for Linda to feel comfortable to “cry” and to “grieve openly.” Linda explained, “I don’t like to show my emotions to anybody, so the letter was good because I could show my emotions, and I guess it was like he was still there, even though he wasn’t.” Linda added that she “wanted to be more open” about her grief with her counselor the next time they met.

Linda described her experience of choosing to “re-read the letter four times on different days.” Linda advised that reading the letter made her feel “cared for . . . wonderful . . . amazing.” Linda also described feeling “relieved” when she read the letter. Linda described her experience of “not being used” to something “so positive . . . so honest or open.” Linda advised that her counselor’s willingness to be “open and honest” in the letter was “really important. Linda reiterated the importance of her counselor being “so to the point” in the letter, because she could “go back to the letter” and “actually understand better for [her]self.” Linda explained that the letter supported her in “realizing” what she “needs to work on,” advising, “I can start grieving for my brother.” Linda described that it was significant that her counselor included important aspects of her sharing such as her counseling including “a song” they had discussed in a previous counseling session in the letter, “There’s a song. I didn’t think he would write that . . . surprising to find positive things.”
Linda further described that the letter helped her feel increased feelings of “connection” to her counselor, “He is somebody that I can really relate to . . . feel more connected to. I really think I could tell him more, and he wouldn’t judge me. It makes everything okay to tell him . . . after I read the letter the last time, I finally realized, he’s here to help me . . . he’s not here to make me feel like an idiot or to feel like a crazy. I don’t need to lie.” Linda experienced increased feelings of safety in the relationship as a result of her experience of the letter, describing her counselor as being “trustworthy . . . and a friend” and an increased desire to share and begin to work on important aspects, such as grief and loss concerns about deceased members of her family.

Linda additionally described that she “told everybody that [she] got a letter.” “I wanted my daughter to read it . . . I just wanted them to see what I am going through.” Linda described previously not talking about her therapy experience with family members but that the letter “helps me outside . . . talk to more people like openly.” Linda described feeling like the letter supported her in being able to “perceive myself as a person” and to see how far “she has progressed” during the counseling experience. Linda made recommendations for additional letters in the future.

Linda’s experience of receiving a counseling letter contains six core descriptive themes: (a) increased feelings of closeness in the counseling relationship, (b) seeing the counselor as more trustworthy, (c) desire to share letter with others, (d) increased confidence to work on counseling goals, (e) positive feelings as a result of reading the letter, and (f) the importance of obtaining her counselor’s perspective about her.
Individual Textural Description of Nikki's Experience of Receiving a Counseling Letter from her Therapist

Nikki presented to counseling to address problems of living related to depression and poor self-esteem, advising that she “often” doubts herself as a mother. Nikki has met with her counselor at a community mental health agency for the past several weeks.

Nikki described her experience of receiving the letter from her counselor, “It was really cool . . . and nice to get a letter from him.” Nikki described feelings of excitement at receiving the letter in the mail, advising, “Oh, great! I got it! Yeah!” She advised, “I don’t get letters very often . . . I was excited because for once I got a piece of mail that wasn’t a bill.” She additionally described, “It felt good to receive a letter from someone else in my life . . . it made me glad . . . and happier than what I had been cause I had really been beating myself up.” Nikki advised that the letter supported her in feeling “less negative” toward herself. Nikki additionally described feelings of “excitement, happiness, and nervousness” in regards to her experience of getting the letter from her counselor. She advised that she felt “surprised” at what her counselor wrote in the letter, “I wasn’t sure what to expect. I wasn’t sure what he was going to say. I didn’t know what to really expect . . . you don’t know.”

Nikki described that the letter felt like a “gift” because it supported her in “getting his feedback” about her. She advised, “I was able to get his perspective on a few things that I hadn’t had before. It is nice to hear good things about me. It was really interesting.” Nikki described that receiving her counselor’s feedback in the letter was more significant than hearing it in person, “Maybe I just didn’t believe him telling me I was a good mom [in the counseling session] . . . I have a tendency to tune stuff out. Writing is a good way for me. Instead of missing bits, I can read what is being said. I catch more, like in his letter to me. When people are talking to me, it kind of washes over me, and I don’t even realize it.” Nikki described that it was helpful to be able to “read it through” several times, “I read it through the first time and then I read it through two more times slower to make sure I didn’t skip over bits at all. I find something new in it that maybe I didn’t catch before.” Nikki was able to “catch more” by getting her counselor’s feedback in letter form.

Nikki described the letter as supporting in her “getting an overall feel for what he is saying.” Nikki described the letter in encouraging her to be more reflective, “I actually took the time to sit down and read it . . . to sit there, to sit down and read.” Through this reflective process, Nikki advised, “It gave me a chance to relive what I talked about or kind of relive what I heard . . . it gave me that trigger to relive that memory.” Nikki explained that the letter helped her to remember more of what was discussed in session and to continue to think about it outside of counseling, advising that she gained a “new perspective on things.” She additionally added that the letter helped her see how she can “use some of the stuff from our sessions together in my day to day life.” Nikki added that it was like her counselor was communicating to her, “Here’s what you can take from this.” The letter supported Nikki in “taking” the material from the session and integrating it more fully into her life outside of the counseling environment.
Nikki also described the experience of feeling “closer” to her counselor as a consequence of the lettering experience, “I think it kind of draws me closer to him . . . receiving the letter almost makes him feel more like a friend, than just like my counselor, the person I talk to . . . he’s more of a friend that I can confide in, rather than just someone who is getting paid to talk to me.” The letter had an impact on Nikki’s perception of her counselor, enabling her to see him as a friend and as someone that wants to listen to her. Nikki described increased feelings of “comfort” in talking to her counselor and feeling like she will be “less nervous, anxious, uncertain . . . and fidgety” when they meet together. She further advised that the letter supported her in seeing that her counselor “genuinely cares” about what she “has to say,” saying that “it is not just a job to him” and “wanting to trust him more.”

Nikki also described wanting to share the letter with her fiancé, explaining that she was “excited” for him to see what she was going through in counseling, and the letter supported her in being able to do this with him.

Nikki’s experience of receiving a counseling letter contains six core descriptive themes: (a) feeling surprised about the content of the letter, (b) increased feelings of closeness with counselor, (c) perception of counselor as a person changes, (d) wanting to share the letter with someone else, (e) positive feelings as a result of reading the letter, and (f) reading feedback in the letter is more helpful than hearing it in person.
Individual Textural Description of Cassie’s Experience of Receiving a Counseling Letter from her Therapist

Cassie was in a counseling relationship with her counselor at a community mental health agency for a little over a month and presented to address difficulties related to depression and feelings of low self-esteem.

Cassie described her experience of reading the counseling letter, advising that it “made” her “feel good,” explaining that it “felt nice not to get something in the mail that was a bill.” Cassie described feeling “anxious” about what her counselor would write about in the letter, “I’m not even sure what I expected it to say, but I didn’t really expect him to say stuff like that. I didn’t expect him to put things in it that would make me feel good . . . I expected him to put in things we went over.” Cassie described having negative assumptions about what the letter would contain.

Cassie described her experience of receiving her counselor’s feedback about her in the letter and compared this to receiving his feedback in a counseling session, “He talked about me being a good mom in the letter. I liked that cause I always feel like I’m gonna be like my parents were. I don’t see that I’m a good mom. That’s what stuck out to me [in the letter] . . . it helped. I think it helped me think about this a little more, like how I could feel it more.” Cassie explained that her counselor will often give her positive feedback in the counseling session but she “has a hard time remembering it . . . just getting it.” Cassie explained, “Having it there in front of me, you know to hold, like to read it over again, I could see it. When I’m told stuff, I’m like, ‘Oh yeah, right.’” Cassie described that it is difficult for her to “hear” feedback from her counselor when she is feeling “real depressed or down,” saying, “I’m not any of those nice things you are saying.” Cassie described feeling “good” when she re-read the letter, saying, “I read it a lot.”

Cassie reported that through the letter, she felt like she “stuck out” in her counselor’s “head.” She explained that she “looked at it [letter] more” as a consequence of this. She also advised that her counselor recalled aspects of previous counseling sessions in the letter, which she described as him “remembering . . . he remembered that I was caring . . . it made me feel good.” Cassie described several positive feelings as a result of reading the letter, including, “I smiled . . . happy, warm feelings.” Cassie described these feelings remaining even after reading the letter. Cassie reiterated that reading the letter “helped.”

Cassie described that her counselor’s use of her words in the letter was helpful because it helped her to “remember exactly” what she was saying.” She described feeling “surprised” at some of what she had said in the session, which helped her to see “how well” she was “describing” the way she was feeling.

Cassie also described that it felt “good” to know that she was having “an impact” on her counselor, “It made me feel like I am doing something right.” Cassie described having feelings of doubt about her relationship with her counselor before receiving the letter, “. . . sometimes, I think he wasn’t really listening or if I was just another person that was like, ‘Let’s get her out of here.’ I feel like you go in, you tell him what you are feeling, and they say, ‘blah, blah, blah.’” Cassie expressed that
receiving the letter helped her to “see” that her counselor “does listen” and that she is “not just another person” to him. Client described that this helped her to feel like she was unique to her counselor and that he doesn’t “get tired” of “hearing” her “problems.” She further described that she was able to see her counselor as not just doing a job and “getting paid” to listen to her. She also advised having doubts about the degree of her counselor’s caring for her, “How could he care for so many people?” and wondering if her counselor saw her as being “a real couk.” She explained that she had wondered if her counselor’s “caring for her” was “just a talk” that he had “learned to say.” Cassie advised that the letter helped to dispel some of her doubts, advising that it “communicated that he really does care.” She explained that the letter increased her feelings “of hope” that she could get better by going to counseling advising that initially she had no hope and thought he didn’t really listen to her. She explained that after receiving the letter, it “made me want to go more.”

Cassie additionally described wanting to share the letter with her husband so that he was “able to see a little bit more of me and what I have been trying to tell him.” She explained, “It helped him want to see me and what I am going through.”

Cassie additionally indicated that her counselor’s disclosure about his feelings and how he relates to her in the letter “really helped,” stating that it helped her see him as a “person” and “not just a professional counselor.” She advised that the relationship felt “more” like “it went two ways,” advising reciprocity.

Cassie’s experience of the counseling letter contained six core descriptive themes: (a) the letter produced positive feelings, including about the self, (b) increased feelings of connection with counselor and a desire to keep going, (c) helped client to see the counselor differently, (d) the experience of counselor caring, (e) feeling surprised about the content of the letter, and (f) seeing the feedback in a letter is more helpful than hearing it in session.
Individual Textural Description of Lisa’s Experience of Receiving a Counseling Letter from her Therapist

Lisa had been in a counseling relationship with her therapist at a private practice setting for several months, stating her primary goals for counseling were to explore intrapersonal conflict regarding her unhappiness in her marriage relationship. Lisa described challenges with feelings of guilt and concerns about being judged by close friends and family and her community.

Lisa described the experience of receiving and reading the counseling letter from her therapist as being “overall, a positive thing,” explaining, “It made me feel good.” Lisa described the “message” in the letter as being a “very positive thing” and that “reading the letter made me feel good.” She reiterated this sentiment several times throughout the course of the interview process.

Lisa explicitly described the importance of the letter being “reaffirming of what I already knew.” She explained that “seeing it in the letter” made what she had been feeling with respect to her counselor “more obvious.” Lisa described the letter’s impact on her experience of “feeling understood,” advising, “She totally, totally gets what I am talking about . . . no misunderstandings . . . she gets how I am feeling . . . It is nice to be understood, and the letter added a level of understanding . . . she gets me . . . there’s one person out there that gets me.” Lisa exclaimed, “Wow!” at her experience of reading through the letter with respect to her experience of feeling understood by her counselor in the letter. She explained that the letter “reaffirmed” this feeling in her relationship with her counselor, explaining the letter “made” her feel “a little bit closer” to her counselor, advising, the letter helped confirm that her counselor “wants to be on this journey with me.”

Lisa explained that the letter supported her in feeling her counselor’s desire to empathize with her experience and her struggles, saying that her counselor, via the letter, “kind of empathized with me . . . she understands my struggle, she understands that I’m not making quick decisions and it’s going to take some time . . . she knows I’m tired, she knows I don’t know how much patience I have left in me.” Lisa described that her counselor shared how she feels about her (Lisa) and that this was significant in helping her understanding more clearly her counselor’s feelings of “liking,” “admiration,” “understanding,” and “respect” for her as a person.

Lisa described her counselor “kicking it to another level” in the letter by clarifying with Lisa in the letter her thinking about some of her concerns, describing one specific example of a statement that her counselor made in the letter that had not been shared previously, “signals an awakening.” Lisa stated, “We’ve never said those words. I haven’t thought those, she’s not said those, but I feel like . . . she’s kind of organizing . . . outlining . . . my thoughts . . . my struggles . . . and putting them down . . . it is an awakening, you know my feelings . . . I’m truly understanding them and seeing them or feeling them.” She described her counselor’s “thoughtfulness” in the letter and willingness to share as supporting her in having increased insight into her own feelings and thoughts concerning her experience of her marriage.
Lisa also described how in the counseling relationship, she (Lisa) often “vomits information . . . blah, blah, blah, blah . . . ” and leaves little space for her counselor to share, “she might get like a sentence in somewhere . . . but it’s really not an exchange of conversation like back and forth.” Lisa described that in the letter, her counselor had an opportunity “to address some of the issues” that they had been talking about. Lisa explained that this was significant because it showed her that her counselor had “obviously been giving some thought to my issues . . . it made me feel good.”

Lisa described her desire to share the letter with close others in her life, including in the future. “My girlfriend wanted to read it . . . she read it, and it made her cry . . . she found it touching.” Lisa described the impact of the letter on her girlfriend due to fact that she was able to see what she (Lisa) was going through. Lisa also is contemplating sharing the letter with her husband. Lisa described how she might share the letter with her children in the future at some point if she decided to end her marriage with her husband, “It’s something I could show my kids . . . you know I just want you to understand that this wasn’t a decision that I made overnight . . . I want you guys to get that I didn’t just give up and walk away.” Lisa described wanting to keep the letter and reflect back on it in the future when she is “feeling down” and to remind herself that, “There were people who were helping me.”

Lisa described the importance of finding out in the letter how her counselor thinks and feels about her, “I know how she feels about me.” Lisa explained during the interview that the letter showed her that her counselor “likes” her and “admires” qualities in her, which helped strengthen her belief that her counselor doesn’t see her as “nuts.”

Lisa’s experience of receiving a counselor letter contained six core descriptive themes: (a) experience of positive and good feelings as a result of reading the letter, (b) desire to share letter with close others, (c) increased feelings of closeness with counselor, (d) the importance of being understood by her counselor, (e) increased insight into self and concerns, and (f) letter viewed as a gift and will save it to look back on over time.
APPENDIX P

INDIVIDUAL STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTIONS
Appendix P

Individual Structural Descriptions

Structural Descriptions of Charlotte’s Experience of Receiving a Counseling Letter from Her Therapist

The structures that permeate Charlotte’s experience of receiving a counseling letter from her counselor are expressed in Charlotte’s perceptions regarding the way she feels about herself, feelings and assumptions about how her counselor views her and thinks about her, the impact of written language versus spoken communications, and uncertainty regarding the counseling relationship.

Regarding feelings about self, Charlotte described previous feelings about the self as being “not very intelligent . . . stupid . . . and dumb.” Charlotte expressed sad feelings regarding her perception of self. Charlotte explained that it felt “surprising . . . and shocking” to see in the letter that her counselor views her as being “intelligent,” saying, “I am really not that stupid or dumb.” Charlotte felt “happy and good” as a result of reading this feedback from her counselor and increased “thoughtfulness” toward the self. Charlotte described how her counselor has provided this feedback in previous sessions but that it was “more meaningful” to read in a letter, explaining that it is “more believable” and “nicer” to “see it written down.” Charlotte explained the significance of written communications in her own personal life and described the letter as a “very personal experience” between her and her counselor, increasing feelings of “closeness and friendship.”

Charlotte explained confusing feelings in regard to how her counselor views her, explaining that she is “very positive” toward her and asked, “Why does she see me that way?” Charlotte was “curious . . . and anxious” about her counselor’s perception of her, saying, “What does this person think about me?” It appeared that a significant amount of Charlotte’s concerns, particularly with her counselor, consisted of negative self-perceptions that she projected onto her counselor. The experience of getting her counselor’s feedback in the letter appeared to support Charlotte in developing a perception of her counselor that she is “trustworthy,” and Charlotte can continue to take risks in the counseling relationship to work on problems of self. Charlotte explained that she re-read the letter in order to “reflect” about the content and in order to “understand” the things her counselor was sharing with her. Charlotte anticipated a “negative” and “critical” experience with the letter but was not sure why she held these assumptions toward her counselor.

Charlotte felt “noticed” by her counselor, advising that it “felt good” to be “seen” by her counselor and to have this experience communicated in the form of a letter. Charlotte described feeling “evoked” by certain parts of the letter and a desire to “interpret” it right. Charlotte explained that the letter helped her think about a particularly ambiguous part of her life more thoughtfully and an increased desire to talk about her experience more openly with her counselor.
Charlotte described wanting others in her life to see what she is going through, and the letter provided her with a context to “show” others her experience. It was important in Charlotte’s experience to learn of her counselor spending time outside of counseling appointments to reflect about her and her concerns and to extend this caring in the form of a letter in a handwritten fashion, which Charlotte described as “personal . . . more meaningful.” Charlotte described how this experience led her to feel like she is not viewed as “just a patient” by her counselor and the existence of friendship qualities in the counseling alliance. Charlotte described feeling “more relaxed and comfortable."

The implication is that Charlotte valued the letter due to what it came to symbolize for her with respect to her feelings about self, feelings about her counselor, and feelings about the counseling relationship. The letter additionally supported Charlotte in feeling increased feelings of “security” with self and self in relationship to other. The letter was personal due to the fact that it reflected counselor use of time and effort to support Charlotte with concerns. Charlotte was additionally able to reflect about her experience as a mother in transition with adult children and consider a future that is both uncertain and hopeful.
The thematic structures contained within Megan’s experience of receiving a counseling letter from her therapist relate to increased feelings of openness with counselor, feelings of specialness, and shifting perceptions regarding her feelings about herself and her concerns for therapy.

The letter evidenced her counselor’s “concern” for Megan and the issues she is bringing to counseling. Megan described increased feelings of confidence in the problems she is discussing with her counselor, “I bring to the table valid issues that she feels she can help me with.” Megan described holding a perception that her counselor viewed her as being “whiny” with respect to her challenges and explained that the letter helped her understand her counselor’s perspective about her problems, advising it demonstrated to her that her counselor “values” her feelings and concerns. Megan described the letter as containing evidence that her counselor “thinks about” her outside of the counseling session. Megan described this initially as “uncomfortable,” because she holds a view of self as not “being unique” or “special,” explaining that her counselor looks at her as “a unique person” and “respects” and “likes” her as a “person.” Megan described feeling “good” and feeling “helped” through this process.

Megan explained that through the letter, she obtained clarity about how her counselor “looks” at and “thinks” about her, “What I say to her is important, she looks at me with a positive attitude. She views me as a really neat person.” Megan explained, “She has an opinion of me that is higher than what I would give to myself.” Megan explained that seeing her counselor’s opinion of her helped to “extend the camaraderie we share,” explaining that she viewed the relationship as reflective of “more of friendship” as a consequence of her counselor’s “openness” in the letter. Megan described increased feelings of “wanting to go back,” explaining increased perception of safety and security.

Megan additionally described feeling unsure as to how her counselor viewed her prior to the experience of receiving the letter, explaining, “I really didn’t know what she was going to say at all . . . I didn’t know how she perceives me.” Megan explained that “getting” her counselor’s emotions in the letter was important and contributed to Megan’s experience of feeling “like a person” and that her counselor “gets me.”

Megan explained that the letter supported her in feeling “cherished” by her counselor, which she described as “valued” and that her problems are “important” to her counselor. “She is a counselor, a person, who is really concerned with me.” Megan described “increase in comfort” to tell her counselor “anything.”

Megan additional described feelings of “excitement” and “surprise” at the experience of receiving the letter. Her experience of feeling “understood” by her counselor was a paramount aspects of her experience and one that contributed greatly to the experience as being “very positive.”

Some of the implications for this letter for Megan were an increased desire to talk about difficult, previously unshared, aspects of her experience, increased safety in the counseling relationship, improved feelings about the self, and feelings of closeness as a
result of the counselor relating to her “also as a person.” The letter appeared to communicate to Megan that her counselor views her problems as valid, enabling Megan to see herself and her concerns with more legitimacy. The letter also enabled Megan to consider a perspective that she is unique and the relationship she shares with her counselor is supportive enough for disclosure about “bad” aspects of self. Receiving feedback in letter form was additionally meaningful because it enabled her to reflect and “hold” the information in her hands.
Lisa described a close, trusting relationship with her counselor, advising her primary goals for counseling have been to gain insight regarding her feelings about her relationship with her husband and indecision regarding whether or not to remain in the marriage.

Lisa described the primary impact of the letter was the experience of seeing that her counselor “totally gets” her, explaining that it felt “nice” to feel this degree of understanding from her counselor via the letter. Lisa described how her counselor “kicked it to another level” in attempt to “clarify” deeper levels of understanding. The counselor attempted to communicate empathically to Lisa’s experience in the letter, and Lisa noted this, advising, “I know how she feels about me . . . she understands my struggle, and she understands that I’m not making quick decisions . . . she knows I’m tired.”

Lisa described her counseling sessions with her counselor as primarily consisting of her (Lisa) “vomiting” information and not allowing much opportunity for her counselor to share. She viewed the letter as her counselor’s “turn” to address some of her feelings about the issues they are working on together. Lisa described seeing this process as reflective of the reality that her counselor “obviously gives thought” to her issues and described feeling “good” as a result of this.

Lisa described on several occasions that it felt “good” to have her counselor empathize with her struggles in the letter and pointing to the decisions she is having to think about in her life as a result of counseling, describing the letter as a “positive” experience in this area. She described the letter as being both “positive” in its “message” and described “reading the letter” as a “good, positive” experience. Lisa described “feeling good about herself” as a result of the receiving the letter.

Lisa noted that the letter did help her feel “a little bit” closer to her counselor, explaining that their relationship had been “strong” before her reception of the letter. She explained that it illustrated to her that her counselor has a desire to “be on this journey with” her, which she noted as being important.

Lisa explained that the letter helped her achieve “new thoughts,” suggesting that the ideas her counselor introduced in the letter find a “new awakening,” saying that she was able to “understand” her feelings and “see and feel” them in a different way.

Lisa suggested that it felt “nice and good” to hear her counselor comment in the letter on positive qualities about her that she (counselor) admires, explaining that this made her feel “happy.” Lisa commented that the she felt “respected” by her counselor over the course of reading the letter.

The letter also provided a tangible experience that Lisa could share with others both in the present and potentially in the future to indicate the work she was doing in counseling. She described sharing the letter with a close friend and the impact it had on her friend. She also described a desire to share the letter with her children when they are older so that they could understand her decision to leave their father.
The implications for this experience for Lisa is that the letter served to “reaffirm” what she already had suspected in the counseling relationship and to remove doubt from the experience. Lisa described the importance of being able to “see” it in the letter, something she could “hold” and “re-read” in her own time and without distractions. The experience of reading her counselor talk about her interest in her struggles communicated caring to Lisa, and she described this as being positive with respect to her feelings about herself and regarding her feelings about her counselor.
Structural Descriptions of Nikki’s Experience of Receiving a Counseling Letter from Her Therapist

Nikki began meeting with her therapist in order to explore perceived inadequacies as a mother and low self-esteem, which Nikki attributed to an increase in depressive symptoms.

The structures that permeate Nikki’s experience of receiving a counseling letter from her therapist are expressed in her perceptions of the letter's impact on herself, her thinking about her counselor, and the significance of how the letter shifted her perceptions of safety in the counseling relationship.

Regarding the experience of the letter, Nikki described the letter as contributing to feeling “good” about self and about the experience as a whole. Nikki described the experience as supporting her in getting a “new perspective on things” she is experiencing in her life, which she described as being “cool.” Nikki described her experience of her counselor sharing his thoughts about her as being “positive” and “nice to hear.” Nikki described this experience as being “really interesting.” It appeared that Nikki had difficulties regarding her relationship to self, and the positive feedback from her counselor in the letter supported her in feeling “glad” and “happy,” advising that previous to the letter, she had “really been beating [her]self up.”

Nikki described feelings of “excitement, happiness, and nervousness” in receiving the letter in the mail, describing it as a “positive” experience to receive “something in the mail that was not a bill.” Nikki described her nervous feelings as being related to “not knowing” what her counselor would say in the letter. She described that “it felt really good to receive a letter from someone else in [her] life.” Nikki described “not knowing what to expect.”

Reading the content of the letter appeared to have an impact on Nikki’s ability to deepen her experience of the counseling sessions, “This letter gave me a chance to relive what I talked about . . . it gave me that trigger to relive that memory.” Nikki described how the counselor’s use of her language and description of the previous counseling sessions supported her in being able to recall the work she had been doing with her counselor.

The letter also supported Nikki in becoming more reflective about her process, both with herself and of the counseling experience. “I am able to re-read it and pick it apart . . . it actually gave me the chance to sit down and do that and get an overall feel for what he is saying . . . I took the time to sit down and read it, to sit there, to sit down and read.” Nikki described this helped her to “not miss bits” and to “read what is being said” by her counselor, advising she was able to “catch more.” She described difficulties being able to “catch” things that are said, particularly in counseling sessions, advising that her counselor’s feedback often “washes over” her and she “doesn’t realize it.” Nikki also described the significance of being able to re-read the letter, “I read it through more times slower . . . I find something new in it that maybe I didn’t catch before.”

Nikki explained that receiving the letter from her counselor felt “surprising,” explaining that she was “happy” about the positive things her counselor shared regarding her thoughts about her and the work she is doing as a mother. Nikki described the
experience as impacting feelings of “closeness” in the relationship with her counselor, describing her perception of him as a counselor and as a “friend,” someone she can “confide in.” She began to see her counselor less as “someone getting paid to talk” to her and more like someone “who genuinely cares about what I have to say.” She described this feeling of being able to “trust more” in her counselor as “nice” and “more comfortable.”

Nikki shared the letter with her fiancé, advising that it was important for her to “share her excitement” with “the person closest to” her, advising that it was “cool” to be able to help her fiancé understand what she is going through in counseling through the letter.

The implications for Nikki’s experience are that she developed increased feelings of closeness in the counseling relationship and perceived her counselor as being more trustworthy and “genuinely caring” for her. Nikki was able to be more reflective about the counseling experience by being able to “hold” and “re-read” the letter in her own time. Nikki described positive feelings as a result of the experience of getting a letter from her counselor and shifting feelings about herself as a mother, a primary goal for counseling.
Structural Descriptions of Cassie’s Experience of Receiving a Counseling Letter from Her Therapist

Cassie entered into counseling in order to improve feelings of self-esteem, particularly related to her perceptions about herself as a young mother. Cassie described recent increase in feelings of depression and wanting to learn “more effective ways of dealing” with feelings of sadness in her life. The primary structures that pervade Cassie’s experience of receiving a counseling letter from her therapist are related to feelings about the self, feelings about the perceived safety in the counseling relationship, and the letter’s impact on her life outside of the counseling experience.

Cassie described the most primary aspect of the letter was her counselor’s disclosure regarding his perception of her as a mother, explaining that she “liked” being able to hear her counselor’s thoughts about this part of her life, advising “fear” about being like her parents. Cassie described her counselor’s transparency about this aspect of her experience in the letter as “sticking out” and “helping” her. Cassie described being able to “feel it more,” advising that she was able to feel “more positive.” Cassie described that it was significant that “he remembered” this part of her story and talked about it in the letter. Cassie also described that it was “helpful” that her counselor talked about his experience of being influenced by her as a parent, describing this as “making” her feel like a “good mom.” Cassie described, “It feels good to hear him say that I impact him . . . it makes me feel like maybe I am doing something right . . . I feel good.” Cassie described feeling “happy, smiling . . . and warm feelings,” describing these feelings as “sticking out” as she thinks about the letter even after reading it.

Cassie described the feedback in the letter as being more believable, advising that she has a “hard” time integrating positive feedback she hears from others in her life, including her counselor, saying, “I have a hard time getting it . . . When I’m told positive stuff like that, I’m like, ‘Oh, yeah, right.’ Especially in a moment when you are real depressed or down, you’re like, ‘You know what, I’m not any of those nice things you are saying.’ I think people tell me stuff when I’m face to face just because they want to make me feel better.” Cassie described how having her counselor’s feedback “there in front of her to hold and to read over again” enabled her to “see it,” explaining that it “stuck out more . . . and I looked at it more.”

Cassie described the letter as supporting her in being able to understand what her counselor is saying to her, explaining difficulties “taking one thing out of a huge thing,” explaining that the letter “helped” her “know the other things he talked about” in previous counseling sessions. Cassie also described the letter aiding her in being able to remember what was talked about in previous sessions.

Cassie described herself as feeling “anxious” when she received the letter, explaining, “. . . I was really curious . . . I’m not even sure what I expected it to say but I didn’t expect him to say stuff like that.” Cassie advised that she held assumptions that the letter would not make her “feel good.” She reported feelings of being surprised as a result of what she received in the letter and noted that it was “positive” to get something in the mail that was “not a bill.”
Cassie described previous feelings of uncertainty and doubt in the counseling relationship, questioning the extent to which her counselor “really listened,” and whether or not he viewed her as “just another person.” Cassie described the letter as helping her to “see” that “he does listen . . . that I’m not just another person,” and that she is “not last” on her counselor’s list.” Cassie also talked about questioning the extent to which her counselor cared for her less as a result of receiving the letter, “It communicated that he really does care.” Cassie described initially not wanting to return to meet with her counselor due to her perception about him “not listening” and advising “no hope” in getting better.” Cassie explained that the letter helped her to “want to go more.”

Cassie also described wanting to share the letter with her husband advising that he was “able to see a little bit more of” her and what she has been “trying to tell him.” It seemed apparent that Cassie had an increased ability to share her feelings and concerns with others.

The implications for Cassie’s experience are an increased perception of counselor caring and listening in the relationship, increased desire to remain in counseling, increased feelings of self-esteem about significant aspects of experience, counselor feedback as being more “believable” in the letter versus hearing it in session. The letter also appeared to support Cassie in being able to integrate the experiences from counseling sessions into her experiences outside of counseling.
Structural Descriptions of Linda’s Experience of Receiving a Counseling Letter from Her Therapist

Linda presented for counseling to address unresolved grief and loss issues impacting present functioning. Linda also advised prolonged difficulties with self-esteem and depression.

The significant structures infused into Linda’s experience of receiving a counseling letter from her therapist consist of shifting perceptions regarding the counseling relationship, the letter’s impact on client’s perception of self, and movement toward increased openness about experience intra- and interpersonally.

Regarding the experience of receiving the letter, Linda described an expectation of something “negative.” Linda described “surprising” feelings as she read the positive feedback from her counselor in the letter, “How could somebody write something so nice, nobody ever said any positive stuff to me in my life.” Linda described the letter as being “very positive” and feeling “amazed” at the content in the letter. The experience of reading the letter produced “wonderful” feelings in Linda.

Linda described the impact of her counselor being “honest” and “to the point” in the letter and providing feedback about his perception of her difficulties with self-esteem. Linda described not having previous experiences in her life of “anyone” ever being “so nice, honest, and open” and that this was “really important” to her.

Linda explained that this was a significant part of the letter experience, advising, “I didn’t expect him . . . to write . . . about self-esteem.” Linda described “not being sure” she was “reading” what she was “reading,” due to the surprising nature of the content. Linda described re-reading the letter “four times,” and advised that “each time” she read the letter, she cried, which she reported having difficulties doing in counseling and with others. Linda described “not knowing the reason” for why she was crying but explained that as she read, she “continued to cry.” Linda explained that the letter helped her to feel “less bottled-up” and supported her in being able to “have” the “feelings” because “no one was watching” her. Linda explained that she felt like this helped her “to a point” with the grieving process. Linda explained that after reading the letter, she had an increased willingness to discuss her grief with her counselor, “the next phase is going to be the actual grieving I know I need to go through.”

Linda commented on the significance of her counselor including important aspects discussed in the counseling session in the letter, including her disclosure about a song she heard that reminds her of her deceased brother.

It was evident that Linda’s perceptions of her counselor and the counseling relationship were impacted through her experience of the letter. Linda described increased feelings of “trust” and seeing her counselor both as a “professional” and as a “friend.” Linda advised that she sees her counselor “in her mind” as someone there to “help” her. Linda explained that the letter reflected her counselor’s “caring” toward her which she advised helped her see that her counselor “sees her as a person,” enabling her to “perceive” herself as a “person.”

Linda attributed the letter to having a positive influence on her perception of safety in the counseling relationship, “My counselor is somebody that I can relate to . . .
feel more connected to . . . I really think I could tell him more, and he wouldn’t judge me. It makes everything okay to tell him . . . I finally realized he’s here to help me . . . he’s not here to make me feel like an idiot or to feel like a crazy.”

The letter also supported Linda in seeing how far she has come through the counseling experience, “Going back to the letter, I can actually understand for myself if I’ve progressed . . . if there’s maybe things that maybe I need to tell him that maybe I haven’t told him yet.” Linda made recommendations for receiving more than one letter in order to evaluate progress during the counseling experience.

The implications for Linda’s experience of receiving a counseling letter are significant. Linda described increasing positive feelings about herself and greater awareness to discuss difficult aspects of her experience with her counselor. Linda described a desire to be more open with both her counselor and others in her life about what she is going through, indicating increased trustworthiness in others. Linda described feelings of care that she experienced from her counselor in the letter and being able to view her counselor as “someone” who is there to “help” her, alluding to previously feeling more cautious in the counseling relationship. Linda was also able to take important steps toward the grieving process by the letter supporting her in feeling safe to “not be so bottled up” in a space that was more private or not in view of others.
APPENDIX Q

COMPOSITE TEXTURAL DESCRIPTION
Appendix Q

Composite Textural Description

For most of the participants, the experience of receiving a counseling letter from their therapist between appointments was significant across several domains of personal and therapeutic experience. For some, being able to “re-read” the letter multiple times and in a setting without distraction or observation from others evoked an increased reflectiveness about the self and the concerns they are navigating in their lives. One participant described the letter as helping her to “use” the content from the session into her daily life while another talked about the significance of being able to read through the letter several times in order to understand it more clearly. The majority of participants viewed the letter as something they could “hold” and “see” due to the tangible nature of the letter itself. A consistent experience described by participants was “reflecting” or “looking back” about personal issues impacting one’s life and also “feelings of low self-esteem.” The letter appeared to aid clients in “looking at” themselves in light of their counselor’s perceptions expressed in the letter.

Participants commonly described being able to “return” to the letter in the future in order to understand what they were working on while in counseling and to “evaluate” their “progress.” This was attributed to the tangible nature of the letter and the fact that it could be “kept” and used at the client’s discretion.

The opportunity to read how the counselor thinks about them and what they are discussing in counseling in the form of a letter outside of the counseling appointment was marked as significant. Most described the experience of feeling “surprised” as to the “positive” perception their respective counselor had toward them and were “touched” by the way in which the counselor described their feelings and thoughts about them. Each participant consistently described a view of self replete with felt inadequacies or personal doubts and questioned whether or not her counselor felt similarly. Participants described the “expectation” or assumption of receiving something “negative” or that did not make them “feel good” about themselves. Others described assumptions about the letter containing suggestions for what the client would “need to work on” and reported feeling “surprised” about the “positive things in the letter.” Most participants described not knowing previous to the letter how their counselor “really saw them” and held assumptions about the counselor seeing them and their problems negatively. Hearing the counselor’s thoughts about them in the letter brought feelings of “relief” and “happiness.” Participants additionally described increased feelings of “openness” for continued disclosure about areas of self viewed as being “bad” or “negative.”

Some of the clients talked about written feedback from the counselor as more “believable” and “meaningful” suggesting that hearing feedback in a counseling session can be difficult to either remember or consider due to the way they are feeling while talking about their problems. Clients described being able to re-read the counselor’s positive perspective about them in a letter was helpful because they could go back to it repeatedly. The majority of clients also described the letter as being an “affirming” experience, advising that it felt “positive” to feel understood by the counselor, and the
letter supported them in having increased feelings of “hope” that the counselor really did listen and understand “the struggles” the client was going through. Some described feeling “unsure” previous to the letter about the extent to which the counselor was “listening” and “understanding” the concerns being disclosed in session. The letter aided clients in being able to “feel confident” that the counselor was listening to and grasping correctly the challenges clients were facing in their lives. All of the clients in the study described the letter as having a “positive impact” on the way they felt about themselves, describing shifting feelings about previously held negative attitudes about core aspects of self-experience. Most talked about the letter aiding them in realizing something “new” or “special” about themselves and/or their situation, and clients reported that the letter helped them to “reflect more” about what they were talking about with their counselor. Some described being able to reconsider previously held negative feelings about the self in core areas such as feelings about oneself as a mother or thoughts about client-perceived intelligence while others described feeling “happy” that their counselor sees them doing “right things” with their lives and making progress during the counseling experience.

Most viewed the letter as having an impact on the clients’ perceptions of counselor “trustworthiness,” describing the experience of seeing the counselor as a “person,” or being “like them,” and who seems to “genuinely care” about what they are going through. Other described seeing the counselor as being “friend-like” in nature and as being “more than somebody that is paid to listen” to their problems. For some participants, they described feeling “more connected” or “bonded” to the counselor and explained an increased desire “to return to counseling,” suggesting in some instances, previous to receiving the letter, feeling “unsure” about the counseling relationship and the counselor’s view of the client in light of her difficulties. The majority of clients described an increased “confidence” to talk about aspects of their experience that had been previously undisclosed or abbreviated in previous sessions due to “anxiety” about how their counselor might view them. Others described wanting to discuss specific aspects of their experience “more openly” due to the perception (obtained by reading the letter) that their counselor might not understand a particular concern to the extent that the client would like him or her to.

Five of the six participants talked about having a desire to share the letter with close others in their lives and reported this experience as having an impact on outside readers. Participants described an interest in whether or not family members or friends viewed them how their counselor saw them. It appeared that clients were interested in the letter’s ability to additionally influence some degree of acceptance from significant others with respect to the client’s mental health related concerns. One member described wanting to share the letter with her children in the future to help them understand what she was going through while in counseling about a pending relationship issue. Participants seemed to imbue the letter with evidentiary meaning, viewing it as containing a concrete and objective perspective about themselves and the problems they are facing. For others, the letter was a “reminder” of their counselor’s “concern” and “caring” for them and for others, the letter experience supported them in finding increased feelings of “hope” and dispelling previous doubts about their ability to achieve
their goals for therapy. Many of the clients described the experience of receiving a letter from their counselor as being “very personal” and reflected the degree to which their counselor “thinks about” them outside of the time they share together in a counseling session, highlighting the significance of the fact that the counselor expends his or her time and energy when they are not together to reflect in the form of a letter about the issues the clients are going through in their lives. Two of the participants noted the significance of viewing their counselor as “not just being someone who is paid” to listen to them as a consequence of receiving the letter. Some clients commented on personal touches to the letter such as whether or not it was handwritten and the length of the letter in terms of pages.

Many of the clients participating in this study talked about the influence of the personal nature of the letter as supporting them in developing a perception about being viewed by their counselor as “less like a client” and “more like a person” or “human being” or even, “friend.” Most clients described “feeling good internally” and noticing increased “feelings of connection” with their counselor. Other described imbuing the relationship with friendship-like qualities, advising increased confidence to confide in counselor about previously undisclosed feelings and concerns. A few of the clients talked about the counseling relationship feeling more reciprocal, or “two-way” describing a give and take flow to the relationship that the letter added due to counselor disclosure and advised that it was “nice” to see the counselor reveal some of their emotions in the letter. Others talked about the letter being helpful due to the perception that the counselor “doesn’t talk much during the session” and the letter gives them an opportunity to share with the client things they might not have disclosed during the face-to-face meeting.
APPENDIX R

COMPOSITE STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION
Experiencing a humanistically-oriented counseling letter from a therapist between counseling sessions evokes a myriad of feelings in the lives of those clients who receive them. Some common feelings described by clients who received such a letter from their counselor were feeling positive, happy, glad, uplifted, joy, appreciation, excitement, and surprise. Others described feeling unsure and anxious about what the counselor might actually write in the letter, advising not knowing beforehand how the counselor really thought about them. Many of the clients talked about worries about the content of the letter being negative and/or having expectations that the letter would be markedly different than what they actually received. Many of the clients explained that they were surprised and relieved to read through the letter and find their counselor’s positive feelings about them and the problems they were addressing in counseling. Some clients described not knowing how their counselor could see them so positively due to the issues they were talking about in counseling.

Clients described this as having an impact on how they thought about themselves and areas relative to self-esteem difficulties, particularly about core aspects of experience and identity, such as one’s feelings about self as a parent and another regarding her feelings of self-competency. Some clients were surprised by the counselor’s transparency in the letter, explaining that they had never thought of asking their counselor how they see them due to personal fears about what their counselor would say and whether or not their counselor would actually be honest with them.

The letter aided clients in feeling seen or looked at, noticed, and understood by their counselor, which was described as having a positive correlation on clients ability to see themselves more positively and also influenced clients’ feelings and thoughts about perceptions of safety and trust in the counseling relationship. Counselors were viewed as being more trustworthy, friendlike, and someone that could be confided in with increased confidence. Clients talked about feeling more comfortable to take greater risks regarding disclosure in the counseling relationship, particularly about bad areas of self that had been undisclosed up to this point in the relationship due to fears about the counselor seeing them as increasingly “couky,” “nuts,” or “crazy.” Clients talked about feeling happy and relieved that the counselor sees them as a person versus a previously held perception that they are viewed as one of many clients with problems with indistinct voices, undifferentiated from the hundreds of others that say, “Blah, blah, blah.” The experience of the counselor taking time and effort to reflect outside of session and share these personal reflections in a letter sent to the client via the post evidenced caring, genuineness, thoughtfulness, and feelings of specialness and uniqueness that clients had previously either questioned or altogether, disbelieved.

Clients talked about the letter as slowing down their own process, alluding to previous difficulties to sit back or sit down to reflect about what they are working on in counseling when they talk with their therapist. When looking back, clients reported that they would often ask themselves questions about the counselor’s perception of them and
about others concerns raised by the letter. The written words from the counselor in the letter aided clients in reading over them multiple times and considering them with increased thoughtfulness. Clients described feeling surprised at times by their counselor’s feedback or transparency in the letter, advising it felt nice to hear how their counselor is thinking about the work they are doing together in therapy and about the progress clients have made up to this point.

Many clients described written feedback as being more believable due to the fact that words that are written down have been thought about and are not just said to make someone feel better. The written nature of the letter also reflected the counselor’s commitment to what they are trying to saying and often was described as being more personal. Others described the letter as helping them to see that they are not just one of many clients the counselor wants to receive payment from and then be told to leave the office. The letter supported clients who held previous doubts about the genuineness of the counseling relationship and the extent to which the counselor actually cared for and about them in feeling more confident that the relationship was trustworthy and clients could explore their concerns with more openness. Clients talked about how they wouldn’t have to lie to their counselor anymore after feeling their counselor’s desire to be honest with them in the letter.

For others, being able to see how their counselor actually views them provided enlightenment and relief and in some cases, was shocking, and supported them in feeling more comfortable in their lives outside of counseling. The letter appeared to have a significant impact, in most cases, on perspectives about the self. Clients described pervasive challenges with self-esteem about core aspects of experience and described the letter as supporting them in reconsidering how they think about themselves. While most clients didn’t describe a complete transformation of self-experience, the majority of participants described feeling more positive about the self as a result of reading their counselor’s feedback about themselves than previous to receiving the letter, including times their counselor has provided them with similar feedback in a counseling session. Some clients described the counselor’s words as being more trustworthy in a letter than in a counseling session while others described being able to receive feedback in a letter more readily due to the fact that the counselor’s words often wash over them when heard and are difficult to remember afterwards.

Regarding the experience of the letter, client nervousness was often indicative of fears about their counselor viewing them similar to how they think about themselves in light of their problems. Fears about being viewed as nuts, like a patient, or as someone that is whiny, contributed to anxiety about full disclosure in the counseling relationship, particularly about aspects of self that were perceived as ugly or uncomfortable. Clients, in some cases, talked about increased confidence to explore these issues with the counselor due to the letter’s impact on the perception of counselor caring as being more genuine and reflective of friendship. Over the course of reading the letter from the counselor, one client talked about being able to see in her mind that her counselor was there to help her and not to tell her that she is crazy while others talked about feeling reaffirmed by the fact that their counselor totally gets them. Others talked about the
experience of feeling liked, valued, and respected by the counselor which was described as touching and impressive.

The experience of wanting to share the letter with close others, both in the present and over the course of time was also significant as it crossed five of the six participants’ experiences. The primary structures that appeared to permeate this experience were client curiousness about whether or not close others viewed them in a similar light as that of their counselor and an increased confidence or desire to be understood by significant others. The letter’s concrete nature lent itself in client experience to being something that could be shared with trustworthy others and was marked as being positive and helpful to share with others, even though in many cases, clients described that their expectations for sharing the letter were not always realized. Clients talked about the letter as having an impact on those they confided in with the letter. One described her friend’s tearful response to the letter as a result of feeling her counselor’s caring for her in the letter and another described her spouse as being able to understand what she is going through better as a result of reading the letter.

The experience of new awareness about self that had previously been less figural and undifferentiated from the ground was also significant with respect to clients’ experiences of the letter from their therapist. One participant described previous difficulties with grief due to the fact that she had not been able to cry over several recent losses of family members. The client described that she cried each time she read the letter but initially didn’t know why. After the fourth time reading the letter, she realized that she was aware that she was actually grieving the loss of her mother and was able to do this due to being able to read the letter in private. She described fears about emotional expression in the presence of others and explained the letter provided safety and yet also enabled her to hear her counselor through the letter. She advised increased feelings of confidence to begin the grieving process. Another participant talked about feeling too afraid to start a new chapter in her life after a painful divorce. This client described perceptions of self as being stupid and dumb and felt incapable of making a better life. She described reading her counselor’s perception of her intelligence in the letter as significant and more meaningful and aided her in having shifting feelings about herself. She described feeling more confidence and being able to see her intelligence more experientially as a result of seeing it in the letter versus being told in a counseling session.

Participants described their counselors’ use of precise language in the letter as a significant aspect of their experience. Particularly, clients noted times when the counselor used client language in the letter as being surprising and helpful. Clients talked about being shocked at things they had said in session about themselves that their counselor reiterated in the letter. Clients described being able to use the counseling session more effectively in their day to day lives as a result of the letter and described being able to remember more of what was discussed as a result of the letter, whereas in most cases, the letter afford written evidence of the counseling experience, including aspects or details concerning the client that may have been otherwise overlooked or forgotten with the passing of time.
The concrete and tangible nature of the letter was also marked as significant by participants. Clients talked about being able to hold it in their hands in order to read it. Being able to sit down and read the letter aided clients in thinking about issues more reflectively and without outside or emotional distractions. Some clients described receiving the letter in the mail as happy due to its positive nature when compared with the typical receipt of negative material, such as bills, through the mail. Most clients described a mixture of positive and anxious feelings. Client anxiety was discussed as feeling unsure about the content of the letter and perceived negativity regarding what the counselor would actually write. In all cases, clients were surprised about their counselor’s tone in the letter, describing it as personal and friend-like, and explained that it felt nice to have someone else in their commenting on their positive qualities. The majority of clients described the experience of feeling happy to re-read portions of the letter that contained positive information about the personhood of the client. Participants described the experience of smiling while reading the letter, feeling warm inside or good internally, and wanting to hug or express gratitude to the counselor when they see each other again.
APPENDIX S

TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL SYNTHESIS
Appendix S

Textural-Structural Synthesis

The experience of receiving a humanistically-oriented counseling letter from a therapist between counseling sessions for most participants was a special event that impacted the clients’ feelings about themselves and their perceptions about their counselor and the therapeutic relationship. Most participants described feeling “anxious” and “not sure” about what their counselor would write to them in the letter, in most cases, advising an assumption of a “negative” experience. Clients described not knowing how their counselor thought about them and in some cases believed that their counselor would confirm their negative view of self in the context of written feedback in a letter. Clients noted “nervous” feelings related to their expectation that the counselor would see them as a “cuck,” as being “nuts,” or being “whiny” relative to the problems they are discussing with their counselor. Others noted that they were “surprised” to find in the letter that their counselor sees them “positively.”

Most commented on how certain parts of the letter stood out for them, particularly parts where the counselor commented on aspects of the client relative to a particular area where the client struggles with the way they see and feel about themselves, such as parenting, self-esteem, and relationship issues with significant others. Clients commented on how it felt “really good” to be “noticed” and “seen” by the counselor through the context of the letter. Many of the clients in this study described having negative feelings about self and related psychological struggles as a result. Common experience of “surprise” and relief” were noted by participants as they read their counselor’s affirming perspective about them in the letter. Participants described difficulty with hearing positive feedback from the counselor while in session due to feeling “unsure” about whether or not their counselor “really meant” it or was “just saying it” to make them feel better. Others described how positive feedback in a counseling session “often washes over” them and is difficult to retain afterward. It appeared that written feedback had a “believable” quality to it in that some clients described feeling “unsure” about their counselor’s feelings about them even after the counselor had provided positive feedback in a session. The ability to see the feedback in writing contributed to a significant impact on client experience. One participant noted, “Until I see it written down . . . only then I would I feel what you might think of me.” She added that to see her counselor’s feelings about her “written down felt more meaningful” then when heard in a counseling meeting.

Participants, in most cases, noted that the letter helped them remember feedback from session and supported them in considering positive feedback with “more thoughtfulness.” Some described that it “felt good inside” to find out how their counselor “actually” sees them and noticed increased feelings of “comfort” with the counselor to previously held assumptions about the counselor seeing them negatively or similar to how clients viewed themselves.

In most cases, participants described the letter from their counselor as being reflective of their counselor’s “genuine caring” for them and their concerns, advising in
some instances, that they had questioned the extent to which their counselor “really cared” about them previous to the letter. One participant described, “I actually felt like he cared for me, that he understands what I am going through.” Another client had felt unsure about the degree of actual caring that existed from her counselor toward her, “How could he care for so many people or is it just a talk they learn to say? It communicated that he really does care.” This client went on to suggest that doubts about the extent of her counselor’s caring for her and the issues she was dealing with had decreased feelings of hope and lessened her desire to continue with counseling. She described after receiving and reading the letter, “It made me want to go more.”

Others talked about the “time, thought, and effort” their counselor put into writing the letter to them. The majority of participants described viewing their counselor previously as “doing their job” or as “someone who gets paid to listen” to them and their problems. It became apparent that over the course of reading the letter, participants described holding a more personal view of their respective therapist, “It’s not just a job to him,” “He’s more of a friend that I can confide in,” “I finally realized, ‘He’s here to help me . . . not to make me feel crazy.’” Another client described how the letter supported her in being able to see the “person” of her counselor through the letter and not just the counselor’s “role,” “Here’s this woman trying to help me adapt to my environment, and she really cares about me.” The letter reflected “time” the counselor is using to support clients that they are not receiving any financial reimbursement for. Clients in most instances were often “surprised” and even reported feeling “uncomfortable” to think that their counselor thinks about them outside of the session. One client even said, “Don’t think about me . . . just drive. I’m not that unique.” The client later described being able to view herself as “unique” and “special,” stating that previous to receiving the letter, she had been putting herself down “a lot.”

Most participants described the letter as having an impact on the relationship between counselor and client, explaining that they felt “more connected” or “closer” as a result of receiving the letter. Some attributed this closeness to the letter evidencing to them that their counselor “totally gets” what they are going through and that there are “no misunderstandings at all.” Others attributed the letter to evidencing the existence of “real listening” from their counselor which was often described as important. In one case, the client explained, “The last time I read it, I thought, he is somebody that I can really relate to and feel more connected to . . . he’s here to help me, not to make me feel like an idiot or to feel like a crazy.” The letter showed clients in most cases that their counselor “really thinks” about them and their problems when they are not together. One client described initial discomfort due to finding out that her counselor thinks about her outside of session, “She thinks of me on the way home! It’s like, ‘Don’t think about me . . . drive. Wow! She’s thinking about me as she drives home. I don’t think of myself as a unique person. I just take myself for granted.” The experience of her counselor thinking about her when they are not together appeared to support the client in reflecting about her tendency to see herself as being “non-unique” and taking herself for granted.

In most cases, clients talked about the letter supporting them in finding “friendship” qualities with their counselor, stating, “My counselor is writing to me like a friend.” Another described, “She is like a girlfriend I haven’t seen for a long time . . .
someone I can confide in.” It appeared that the experience of receiving a letter from their counselor had an impact on the client’s perception of the role of their counselor. One participant explained, “Here’s this woman trying to help me adapt to my environment and she thinks so highly of me, and she really likes me, cares for me, believes in me . . . she cherishes me! Oh my gosh!” Another participant said, “I’m not just a patient to her. I think that’s important.” The experience of receiving the letter from their counselor appeared to shift previous perceptions about how clients viewed their counselor and their assumptions about how the counselor viewed the client and their place in the relationship. The relationship became “more personal . . . more honest . . . more like friendship.” Clients described the relationship as being more “two-way,” explaining, “It was like going through that process together.” Clients reported an increased ability to “relate” and “connect” to their counselor and viewed the relationship as being “more than just a doctor–patient thing.” Related to the experience of friendship, participants described that they felt like their counselor saw them less like a “patient” and more like a “person” or a “human being,” which was noted as important for most clients in this research. They described the relationship as feeling more “two-way” and “more like communication,” particularly due to the existence of counselor transparency about the way they felt toward the client and also counselor disclosure about themselves in the letter. Clients noted that it felt “nice” to think that they could also “influence” or “impact” their counselor through their own struggles.

For many of the participants, they described in an increased desire to be “more open” with the counselor after receiving the letter, explaining that they would like to help them better understands aspects of their experience that they felt like the counselor didn’t completely understand or that they had not disclosed previous due to fears about not wanting the counselor to see “bad aspects” of self. One participant described, “I’m not always unique and need to be cherished because there is this bad side of me. I need to open this part up now.” Another stated, “I can open up to my counselor in order to grieve more.” Others described the letter as containing an invitation from the counselor to talk about their experience in greater depth and reported increased “trust” and “comfort” to be able to do this because they don’t think their counselor is “there to judge” them or “tell” them they are “crazy.” This openness carried over into many of the participants’ lives, advising that in most cases, they chose to share the letter with a significant other(s) such as children, a partner, or a close friend. They described wanting to feel understood by others and the letter gave them an opportunity to help in that process. Some reported that they were interested in whether or not others in their life saw them similarly to the way their counselor viewed them, and others reported that it was important for them to let others know what they were going through. Another participant talked about wanting to share the letter with her children when they are older so that they could see that their mother had thought about her decision to end her marriage with their father.

A variety of emotions were experienced by participants as they received and read the letter from their counselor. One participant stated, “I read the first couple of sentences and just started crying. I don’t know the reason I cried when I read the letter. It felt good to cry.” She later talked about her desire to grieve the loss of a family member and her struggle to enter this process with her counselor. She reported that the
letter enabled her to begin this process because it allowed for her counselor to be with her “in my mind” but to feel comfortable enough to cry openly because of the “privacy” of the experience, i.e., the letter could be read in private. Most participants described feeling “good inside” and feeling “happy” while reading the letter. Others described feeling “touched” and having “warm feelings” and wanting to give the counselor a “hug” and express “appreciation” for the letter. The majority of participants described the letter as feeling “very positive” with respect to its content and also the meaning they gave the experience of their counselor taking the time and effort to write to them outside of a counseling appointment. One participant described feeling “cherished” by her counselor through the letter and others described feeling “amazed” and “shocked” at what their counselor “actually” wrote in the letter.

For most of the clients in the study, they described having new thoughts or insight about themselves and/or their situation. One participant explained, “The letter showed me I have come a long way, and I didn’t feel like I had.” Another stated as a result of being able to re-read the letter, “You sit and think about your life, and there’s more to me . . . I have feelings and I am a human being.” Another described the significance of the counselor’s feedback about her as a mother, “It makes me feel like maybe I am doing something right.” Participants reported that being able to re-read the letter multiple times and in a context without any distraction, they were able to be more “reflecting” and “thoughtful” about their experience, whereas they had not been able to “take the time” to do so previously but that the letter encouraged them to “sit back and sit down” and think about what they are talking about with their counselor with more intentionality.

Several perspectives surface in the statements of participants regarding the experience of written feedback from the counselor as having “more meaning” than feedback that was expressed by the counselor in a face-to-face meeting or counseling appointment. Most described difficulties “believing” their counselor when he or she tells them something positive about themselves, advising, “It kind of washes over me, and I don’t even realize it.” One participant shared that it is “difficult to hear” her counselor’s positive feedback when she is “sitting there feeling all depressed and sad,” saying, “I’m not any of those nice things you are saying.” Others talked about their belief that people will sometimes say things “face to face” in order to “just” make the other person “feel better.” Participants described that “seeing it written out” was “more meaningful,” “more believable,” and felt “more personal.” It also gave clients the opportunity to go back over the letter and re-read it multiple times, which supported clients in most cases with “catching new” information and being able to consider their counselor’s words “more seriously.” Participants described being able to remember the information in the letter “better” than when they hear it in person, which also contributed to the letter’s impact on client experience.

Other aspects of the letter were marked as significant by participants on an individual basis, such as stylistic features of the letter, i.e., handwritten letter versus typed letter and length of letter. Some clients also noted the way the counselor ended the letter which contributed to the “personal” feeling of the letter. It appeared that handwritten letters were viewed as being “more personal” by clients and that they “weren’t just something the counselor had to do.” The length of the letter also appeared to suggest the
counselor’s use of time and effort when thinking about the client and their concerns. Some clients made recommendations for additional letters due to how “helpful” the first letter was and also commented on the ability to “look back” at the letters in order to determine how much they have “progressed” in counseling. Another participant noted the significance of her counselor sharing her feelings about herself in the letter, advising, “My counselor doesn’t really bring in her emotions. I was shocked she opened herself up and told me the things she did. She gave a little bit of herself in the letter.” Counselor transparency about how he or she thinks about the clients and their concerns as well as about themselves and the impact the client has on them personally appears to be valued by clients in the experience of the counseling letter. In addition, the experience of getting something “positive” in the mail was also noted as significant. In many instances, clients described how it felt “nice” to get a positive experience when they go to the mailbox versus the “usual negativity of bills.” Clients noted that their counselor’s use of their language in the letter was also significant in that it felt “surprising” to read what they actually said in session and in most cases was “helpful.” Clients also noted that the letter helped them see how they could use the counseling session in their day-to-day lives. One client said, “It helped me see how I can use some of the stuff from our sessions in my day to day life.” Another client explained, “It gave me that trigger to relive that memory,” explaining that the letter supported her with remembering a particularly significant moment of a previous counseling session that had been dulled due to the passing of time.
APPENDIX T

COUNSELING LETTERS MAILED TO CLIENT PARTICIPANTS
Appendix T

Counseling Letters Mailed to Client Participants

Dear Cassie,

I wanted to share a few thoughts that I had after our last session. One thing that stuck out for me was your feeling, “destroyed on the inside.” I’d like to know more about what this means to you. And I wonder if there are any parts of you that still feel . . . I guess, put together, or intact.

Another thing that grabbed my attention last session was the way that you cared for your son, D-. I noticed the way you carefully attended to his needs while we were talking, the way you gently placed the pacifier in his mouth, and the way you tenderly covered him with his blanket. In that moment, and even now as I think back to that moment, I feel myself hoping that I can be as loving, attentive, and patient with my children when I become a father. I think this also caught my attention because it was inspiring that, even though you felt, and might still be feeling, “destroyed,” you are able to show such love and compassion. This makes me think about the times when we feel sad or hurting. I’ve noticed in myself and in others in my life, that at these times, we often tend to lose sight of the parts of ourselves that allow us to make it through the hurting, and I wonder if your ability to be loving and caring helps you during these times. I’d like to know if this fits for you. If it doesn’t, I’d like to know how caring for others might give meaning to your life, even when you’re facing difficulties.

I also wanted to comment on the discussion that we had about how you would like to feel more “appreciated.” I feel this way at times, and it has been my experience that people sometimes have a difficult time communicating that they are grateful for what others have done for them; many times people can be thankful but have a hard time expressing their gratitude. I don’t know if this might be the case for some of the people you care about, but I’d like to hear what thoughts you might have. I also wonder if there are ever times when you do feel “appreciated,” and if so, what are some of the things you notice about yourself, what are the feelings that come up for you, and how does this effect the way you feel towards yourself? Do you feel yourself pulling away from the individual that gives you appreciation, or do you feel closer and more connected with them? I’d also be interested to know more about what feeling “appreciated” means to you, how others can show you appreciation, what messages you might send to yourself when you feel unappreciated, and how those messages might make you feel. Just a few things I was curious about. Let me know what you think, Cassie.

Lastly, I just want to thank you for the work that you have put in to your counseling experience. I think this says a lot about your desires to grow as a person. I have come to enjoy our working together, and I look forward to seeing you on the 22nd! Until then, take care.

Sincerely,

Caleb
Dear Nikki,

I want to begin by thanking you for your openness with me about everything that you’ve been struggling with. Beginning any counseling relationship can create a great deal of anxiety, and I’m honored that you would feel comfortable enough with me to share your experiences, your song lyrics, and your journal. I feel very humbled by your willingness to share these things with me.

I was touched by your courage to share your past life experience in Ireland with me. When I think back to that discussion, I’m still saddened by the image of you having to watch your son being struck down. But I’m curious about how your awareness of these past experiences might be able to help you. For instance, I wonder if the past Nikki might possess some characteristics or strengths that you might wish to cultivate in the life you are living currently. I also wonder if you think that the past Jessie might be able to provide you with some important advice. I wonder what she might say to you about the things you are struggling with in life. I don’t know if that could be helpful, but I’d be really interested to hear if you have any thoughts!

I would also like to hear more about your storytelling and your characters (though I know you just retired your character.) I would be really interested in hearing more about how your characters are meaningful to you, what they represent to you, and how you can use them in your stories to help resolve concerns that you are facing today. I think that your creativity is one of your biggest strengths, and I must admit my admiration for your inventiveness and originality. It inspires me in my life and in my writing to think of ways that I can more fully explore my creativity, and I wonder what you might think about how you can continue growing your artistic gifts in a therapeutic way.

When you talked about the guilt you sometimes feel with your children, I began thinking about myself and other people in my life. I know for many people, including myself, that it is only human nature to be hard on ourselves for things that we’ve done in the past. But it seems, that at the time (at those times in our past) we likely make the choices that we feel is best for us. I also think that sometimes past events are recalled when they are important, and I’ve noticed with myself and others, that they are important because they are trying to tell us something about what we might need to do differently in the future to help ourselves through the suffering. To me, that you feel sad about the situation tells me how much you truly love your kids, how much you value being a good mother, and it tells how much potential you have to be the mother that you wish to be. Let me know what thoughts or feelings you might have about those ideas. I trust this makes sense, and I look forward to seeing you soon.

Sincerely,

Caleb
Dear Linda,

During the time I’ve spent getting to know you, I can think of many things to say, so I’m not sure if I will be able to find the words to fully express my appreciation for the work that you have done, but I trust this will make sense. First, I want to take a moment to honor your openness with me. Having the strength to discuss the loved ones you’ve lost is a difficult process, and I’ve been inspired with hope for myself and for my work with others by your progress and by your willingness to discuss such painful experiences, and I wonder if you have been finding a similar courage to be open with others in your life about the things that you are struggling with. I’d also like to thank you for teaching me how personal and individualized grieving can be, and if you ever feel open to it, I’d like to hear what advice you might have to give to others that are struggling with losing the important people in their lives. I ask because I can see why so many people (your daughter, your daughter’s friends, your co-workers) come to you for guidance and support, and I’d like to know more about what that is like for you, and how that makes you feel. My experience of you, Linda, has showed me that you are a very open person who is accepting and able to overlook the faults of others . . . probably part of what you called your “motherly intuition.” That also makes me think about what that motherly figure inside of you would like to say during the times that you are hard on yourself. I wonder what the motherly Linda might say when you’re feeling depressed or down, or how you can use your “motherly intuition” to comfort, support, and maybe accept the sad and grieving you.

Last time we met you discussed feeling “silent tears” as you listened to Spirit in The Sky at work. It sounded as if those tears were helpful for you to experience, and I remember you saying that you felt, “relieved.” I would be curious to learn about other times in your life when you might have felt those “silent tears” for those that have passed on. Our last session also resonates with me because I felt sad, and still do in this moment, in thinking about who the wonderful boy you described, Jimmy, might have become as a man. But it sounds, like you said, that he has never been far from you, and I certainly don’t think it was a coincidence that you heard the song playing at work after we had talked about it. I also felt touched by your willingness to allow yourself to cry with me for a moment. I imagine that it might have been difficult, or even scary, but I felt very connected to you, and you helped me understand you better. I also recall that it seemed as though you were trying to hold your tears back, and I wonder what it might be like for you to allow yourself to continue crying with me or perhaps with others that you trust.

I have noticed your dedication outside of counseling, and I think that really speaks to your desires to get the most out of your experience in counseling. I know that you have spent time talking to pictures, specifically to your mother, and I can only imagine how much this must hurt to do. I hope this has been helpful for you, and if so, I’d encourage you to continue speaking to pictures of your mother, father, J-, N-, and L- when you feel you are ready to do so. Also, if you would feel comfortable with it, I would like to learn more about the feelings of anger you may still have towards your mother. I understand that you often feel guilty about having this emotion, but I’ve noticed from my work with others that feeling angry is often a part of learning to forgive ourselves and others. It was unfortunate that I didn’t get the chance to see you last week, but I look forward to seeing you on the 22nd.

Sincerely,

Caleb
I think about you often and feel very thankful that we have had the opportunity to work together. I often leave our sessions feeling that you have offered me insight and wisdom. I always find it remarkable...your ability to self-assess and find another layer of self to reflect upon. One such statement and discussion that touched me recently was your discussion about “this is it?” as you shared your journey into the future noting your feelings of loss as your vision for “what should have happened, what you wanted in life, and what really happened” were/are all very different. As you reflect on your life, particularly your relationships, I am moved when you ask yourself “why couldn’t I have a normal life” I observe you, at times, as grieving what never was, and by all means, not victimizing yourself but sharing with me your journey of sadness and loneliness. I currently think often about how I see...hard working, ambitious, loyal, altruistic, passionate and honest and how frustrated you may feel that these honorable and lovable characteristics didn’t ultimately cultivate the “normal life” you were hoping for. Sometimes, I wonder if maybe that same grief drives you to continue to work hard, stay true and invested in...In most situations, I observe you as you keenly knowing what to do and simply digging in and finding a way to help (books, hospice, Kings Daughters) without asking for much in return. However with...I wonder if it feels uniquely difficult at times, here you cannot simply dig in and help...as many things are his own struggles (his physical pain, his parent’s health). Even when frustrated I witness your deep level of care for him and wanting to support him. Maybe at moments, you see signals that a “normal” life or relationship could evolve, and hence you continue to work hard, seek help, reflect and stay invested in this relationship. I wonder also if much of your current reflection could have been activated and inspired as you and...both watch your parents take their unique journeys into old age. I would love to explore this with you. I would also be interested in talking with you about what facets of your life feel very “normal” as well as which of your many roles/activities leave you feeling the most “normal” and least lonely. I wonder further, what it would be like if you and I talked about how your life can be unique and not normal yet, exactly what “should have happened and did happen” for...I enjoy my time with you and I cherish you.

Reflecting on your journey,

Tiffany
Lisa-

I have truly enjoyed our work together. You often encourage many thoughts following our session together. I thought I might share a few. One thing that I am frequently touched by is your sense of self. Upon reflecting on your marriage, you frequently make statements, such as "I am not that girl." I take from this, that Lisa has gone on a long journey and knows what kind of "girl" she is. This statement signals me as possibly an awakening of previous attributes that may have seemed hidden until recently or maybe a new declaration of being committed and true to yourself! "I am not that girl" is very different than "I am not your girl." Isn't it? I sense with this that your statement isn't about blaming your husband but rather becoming very committed to a more congruent future, one that matches your needs.
With this sense of self, I observe you as taking ownership for some of the patterns that may have led to the current marital state. I truly appreciate how you consistently walk a balance of owning fault yet not being stricken with guilt. In your words your "done feeling guilty". Maybe the guilt didn't offer you the energy and desire to change things?

Speaking of energy . . . I often reflect on your level of motivation and zest; it is remarkable. I wonder how difficult it must be that these recent marital struggles require such patience and processing. I suppose it must/may be challenging to not see change, make definite decisions, have control or even feel much relief as you have delicately pondered your future. I admire that you account for the feelings of all involved and with that you show such dedication to not only yourself but your family.
I wonder often about the helpfulness of your sense of humor. It appears that you can take a difficult situation and mark it with a playful twist. It seems this helps you daily as you live your "crazy life". I wonder if there are times when the humor and playfulness doesn't work? I wonder if you could share with me. Could we explore together what other words would you aspire to replace "crazy" when you define your life.

I would like to support you.

Lastly, I have such empathy for you... the mixed emotions you may feel as your three "babies" that curled up with you, had carpet picnics with you, and inspired you to enjoy "Beauty and Beast" 20 times, are (almost) grown. I feel touched and inspired by your "no regrets" reflections of motherhood. I hope you can share more with me regarding your visions and your role with your children in the future.

I ask "does that vision/role..."
change whether your marriage thrives, survives or ends? I hope we can discuss this sometime.

Lastly, (again) 😊

I wish at times I could alleviate your painful decision-making process. I empathize so greatly with you as you frequently ask “So what do I do?” Maybe desperation is what I hear. That must be a difficult spot to be in given your ability to take action, have a plan be confident & capable in so many other realms. Again, the true answers I hope come to you, and they can only be yours. I, however, feel thankful that you’ve allowed me to hear your journey. I hope to continue to support you.

Thoughtfully ~

Tiffany
I reflect on our time together often. I feel very thankful for the opportunity to see you grow and heal. We've been on a long journey together - when you entered therapy, you shared your concern for your husband's happiness and needs and your desire to improve your marriage. You entered with an open mind, genuineness, and simple honesty. I observed you as overlooking your personal needs and moved forward without blame. Now your goals have changed and our journey has turned - but those positive qualities remain. I, however, have noted additional positive qualities in recent sessions - these I thought I might share.

One that strikes me often is how you notice and embrace simple things that offer you thoughts for the future or simple positivity. I recall on 2 occasions you noticed my office's paint colors, but not for simple small talk but dialogue.
began on how you desire a “colorful” home. Symbolic maybe for your desire for a colorful life, I often feel inspired by your steps towards that life.

That desire for a full life showed again when you booked your trip to Alaska. You appeared so proud as you shared your new surge of independence. You proved “I can do this” — and you did! Interesting to me, it was in or shortly after that session I noticed your new glasses. You look very intelligent in them... you are very intelligent. I recall your struggles to feel smart enough yet I haven’t heard this in quite some time 😊

I admire and am touched by maintaining your commitment to the happiness of your self and your daughters even after your marriage ended. I wanted to share my reflections on your strengths as a mother. Your empathy for your daughters is
remarkable. I notice you let each daughter be an individual—that inspires me as mom. I have heard your parenting voice as a protector, friend, consultant and motivator. I hope you will continue to stand firm and challenge them ultimately they may benefit from the opportunity to support and reciprocate to you. It is with your mothering role, I wonder and question if there is still a high level of grief and loneliness—a concern for what the future may hold should you continue to promote their independence. Do you ever ask “will they need me less or just differently?” or “will their independence leave me feeling alone or less connected?” These thoughts I suppose could be difficult, as I as a mother can imagine the many feelings that arise as our little children become adults. Do you think we might explore this together?
Lastly, I would feel honored should you ever want to show me your scrapbook(s). I read once about the importance of creating a treasure trove of memories. I recognize in you that although not all memories or chapters in life are or have been happy - you've made those memories into meaning, wisdom and optimism. That ability may make others "jealous" (as we discussed this last session). I wonder in those scrapbook pages, what memories are the most precious and meaningful to you today?

My hopes for you - are that you "paint" your beautiful vision; a new home with new memories. Char enjoying her comfortable yet "colorful" life.

Reflecting on your journey—

Tiffany
APPENDIX U

DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS USED BY THE RESEARCHER
## Appendix U

### Data Analysis Process Used by the Researcher

#### Transformation of Data Into Core Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical Step</th>
<th>Researcher Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transcription</strong></td>
<td>Researcher transcribed the audio-recorded interviews conducted with each participant. Interviews were transcribed within 48 hours. This enabled the researcher to also listen to the interview several times which aided in providing the researcher with contextual information, such as tone, nonverbals, pauses, and intonations. Margins were left to the side of the transcription to assist the researcher in recording initial notes regarding units of meaning.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Epoche and phenomenological reduction</strong></td>
<td>The researcher employed bracketing throughout the research process with the assistance of a peer reviewer and reflective journaling. This was done to assist the researcher in being aware of ways in which his biases concerning the research subject could tilt his understanding of the data obtained from the participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reading each interview for a sense of the whole</strong></td>
<td>The researcher read each interview separately, several times, in order to grasp impressions about the experience as it was conveyed by each participant. The researcher continued to employ epoche while reading each transcribed interview in order to remain faithful to the participant’s meaning(s).</td>
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<td><strong>Identification of horizons</strong></td>
<td>As the researcher read through the transcript, he underlined each statement that was related to the phenomenological experience. Statements that were not connected to understanding the experience of receiving a counseling letter were excluded during this step.</td>
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<td><strong>Delineating units of general meaning</strong></td>
<td>The researcher then began a rigorous and intentional process, examining each word, phrase, and statement or expression in order to elicit the participant’s meanings. The researcher noted and recorded specific words that were used that were salient for understanding the participant’s experience. The researcher maintained a log that contained participant thoughts and feelings about receiving the letter. The researcher avoided interpretation and strived to stay close to the actual words and accompanying meanings expressed by the participant with respect to the phenomenon under investigation. In order to identify meaning units, the researcher recorded each expression that had relevance for understanding the participant’s experience with respect to the research question. These verbatim expressions were later categorized and transferred to a word document.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Peer reviewer</strong></td>
<td>At this point, the researcher provided the transcripts and identified meaning units to the peer reviewer. The peer reviewer assisted with determining the accuracy of the meaning units and their corresponding verbatim statement and also supported the researcher in being aware of biases that were impacting the analytic process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coding and numbering</td>
<td>The researcher held each expression that had relevance to the phenomenon under scrutiny to the primary research question. The researcher scrutinized each viewpoint within the context of the question, “Is this an essential constituent of the experience of receiving a therapeutic letter between counseling appointments by this participant?” If the response illuminated the research question, it was noted as a relevant unit of meaning or invariant constituent. The researcher developed broad categories in order to group viewpoints into clusters. Each category was then assigned an initial number with an accompanying category of meaning. The researcher assigned a categorical number to the each viewpoint.</td>
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<td>Reduction of categories, or clustering</td>
<td>The researcher then carefully examined each category in order to collapse categories into smaller and more condensed clusters that contained a statement about the essence of a particular expressed set of viewpoints. The remaining categories were given a corresponding color. The researcher then color coded specific statements. This assisted the researcher in grouping statements that shared a common meaning relative to the phenomenological experience. The categories were then transformed into a word document that listed each expression for the group-as-a-whole.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elimination of redundancy</td>
<td>The researcher then eliminated statements that were overlapping or identical in nature.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Textural Descriptions</td>
<td>The researcher at this stage drafted a brief textural description in narrative form of each participant’s experience. Each description contained the essential aspects of the participant’s experience with respect to the phenomenon of interest and contained verbatim statements. The description was not interpretive in nature.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Member checks</td>
<td>The transcript and descriptive narrative was mailed to each participant and a follow up interview was scheduled. The researcher re-contacted each participant and asked about the accuracy of the descriptions. Modifications or additional information were integrated into the final analysis.</td>
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<td>Written summaries</td>
<td>The researcher created a composite textural and structural narrative for the participants as a whole that contained a summative description about the essential features that were shared by the participants in this study with respect to the experience of receiving a counseling letter between therapy appointments. This assisted the researcher with the following step, emergence of themes.</td>
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<td>Extraction of core themes</td>
<td>The researcher scrutinized the clusters containing the units of meaning for commonalities that were shared by a majority of the participants (four out of six). Majority viewpoints were grouped and identified as a core theme.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional unique viewpoints</td>
<td>Statements expressed by participants that were not shared by the majority were also included for discussion purposes.</td>
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