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Be Here Now: Journey into Therapeutic Presence through Co-Creation

Natalee Martin

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Abstract

Despite extensive research on the therapeutic relationship, the role of therapeutic presence, considered a fundamental aspect of effective therapy, remains underexplored, with its distinctions, applications, and the nuanced experiences of counsellors not fully understood.

This paper explores the author's journey as a counsellor, examining the value of intentionally cultivating therapeutic presence within the therapeutic relationship. This autoethnographic study investigates how therapeutic presence is cultivated and maintained, and whether the counsellor's presence holds more value than technique. From a social constructionist perspective, which advocates for a collaborative approach to therapy, the study considers the possibility of an alternative view on the role of counsellor presence. Data collected over a 10-month period through reflective journals and vignettes inform the research text, drawing on the author's experiences in a counselling clinic working with individuals and couples, and comparing those experiences to existing literature.

Key findings highlight a shift from individualistic understandings of presence toward a relational, co-constructed perspective, one that unfolds dynamically within the counsellor–client interaction. Additionally, cultivating a flexible balance between presence and process appeared to support more attuned and collaborative therapeutic experiences.

Introduction

I believe Maya Angelou's words, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel", capture the essence of my personal and professional orientation. They resonate deeply, guiding me to believe that empathy, kindness, and genuine connections can profoundly impact emotional well-being. This approach shapes my professional and personal life, influencing my interactions with colleagues, clients, supervisees, friends, and family. I consider my way of being with others as intimately tied to the concept of presence.

Growing up along the east coast of Australia as a white Australian woman, with formative educational experiences both locally and overseas, I was shaped by frequent relocations and exposure to diverse environments and relationships. These early experiences fostered adaptability, relational sensitivity, and present-moment awareness, and laid the foundation for my evolving cultural lens and therapeutic stance.

I bring to my research a perspective informed by coastal urban life, varied learning contexts, and the lived experience of a blended family, qualities that continue to shape my values and professional identity. My work as a counsellor, professional supervisor, and mindfulness facilitator is grounded in extensive community sector experience supporting individuals and families from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, a foundation further enriched by postgraduate study that reshaped and refined my professional orientation. These experiences have informed both my therapeutic approach and the direction of this inquiry, fostering a deep appreciation for therapeutic presence as a way of being.

Presence, according to Rogers (1957), involves a wholehearted attentiveness, being mentally and physically anchored in the here and now, allowing for authentic, meaningful connection with others. Similarly, therapeutic presence involves the application of this concept in a counselling setting. It includes active listening, empathy, and creating a safe, non-judgmental space for clients (Howes, 2014).

To better understand the concept of presence, I turned to the literature on therapeutic presence, which reveals its depth, complexity, and varied interpretations across modalities. Therapeutic presence is considered a rich, multifaceted concept (Geller & Greenberg, 2012), with origins tracing back to tribal times when community members offered counsel (Field, 2022). Carl Rogers introduced "therapeutic presence" in the 1940s, emphasising empathy, unconditional positive regard, congruence, and counsellor presence (Rogers, 1957; 1980; Schmid, 2002). Early pioneers like May (1967) and Bugental (1976) underscored its importance in creating a healing environment, while later studies by Hycner (1991) and Erskine (2015) reinforced its relevance.

Research shows that therapeutic presence significantly impacts the healing process, focusing on empathy and creating a compassionate space (Vinca & Hayes, 2007; Geller & Porges, 2014; Cain, 2019; Norcross & Lambert, 2019). Cross-cultural studies reveal that cultural norms influence the expression and reception of therapeutic presence (Zhao, Li, & Chen, 2022; Jin et al., 2022), challenging the notion of a one-size-fits-all approach (Sue & Sue, 2016). Counsellor presence is purported to enhance therapeutic relationships and outcomes, fostering deep connections, building trust, and co-constructing meaning with clients (Gergen, 2009; Anderson, 2012). It is considered crucial for forging genuine connections and sparking meaningful dialogue (Tannen & Daniels, 2010).

Despite its foundational status, counsellor presence remains nuanced and interpreted differently across approaches. Ratner (2017) highlights its ongoing evolution and complexity. Hartley (2002) notes debates on its role and implementation

Corresponding Author: Natalee Martin

Email: intendlife@outlook.com

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in therapy. Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) emphasises attunement to the client's emotional and bodily experiences (Greenberg et al., 1993; Greenberg, 2007). Existential and Gestalt therapies focus on the here-and-now (Bugental, 1987; Perls, 1970; Schneider & May, 1995). Psychodynamic and relational approaches highlight the healing relationship, nurturing a safe space for clients to explore their inner landscapes (Mitchell, 2000; Stern, 2004; Stolorow et al., 1987; Gelso, 2010). Given such varied interpretations and implementations of counsellor presence, one might wonder if the counsellor's nuanced experiences with presence remain understudied because the experience and role of presence differ depending on the approach adhered to, underscoring the need to examine presence within the context of the therapeutic model.

Origins in counselling practice

Beginning my internship at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) counselling clinic, a final-year requirement of my Masters program, I was optimistic. I assumed my full presence and natural relational style would smoothly blend into this setting, allowing me to follow a counselling process while being present with my clients and the counselling conversation. I was naive! A reality check came swiftly. The unique clinic setting, being observed behind a one-way mirror by peers, was far from a typical occurrence. I became fixed on performing well, eager to apply the counselling techniques I was learning. Noting that my focus on technique often overshadowed my presence with the client, and the flow of our conversations, as I clung rigidly to a solution-focused therapy framework. I felt a wave of confusion and uncertainty when the client responded in ways that did not quite fit the structure of my approach, leaving me to wonder if the client felt equally disoriented and lost.

Reflecting on my early counselling sessions, I realised my divided focus had a significant impact. By rigidly sticking to a therapy model, as Keeney & Keeney (2012) highlight, my ability to be fully present and therapeutic was hindered. This created disruption and impacted my effectiveness, noting my struggle to actively listen or ask meaningful or relevant questions of the client. As Anderson & Gehart (2022) maintain, tuning into the unfolding conversation and co-construction can spark more relevant and engaging questions and comments.

The interplay between presence and structured therapeutic processes is a key area of debate. Keeney & Keeney (2012) argue that strict adherence to therapy models can diminish a therapist's ability to be fully present, leading to a sense of disconnection and inauthenticity. They suggest that embracing the uncertainties and mysteries of change allows for a more genuine therapeutic presence. Conversely, some scholars emphasise the necessity of clear theoretical frameworks for navigating relationships and crafting tailored treatment plans (Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Tomlinson, 2019). This tension is further complicated by the argument that some level of structure is necessary to ensure consistency and predictability in therapeutic practice (Malet et al., 2022).

So, there it was, my lightbulb moment about the vital role of counsellor presence. While this concept was not covered during my Masters program explicitly, my own experiences underscored its importance for me. Fostering meaningful connections with others has always been central to my approach, so it felt natural that early in my clinic year, I became intrigued by the idea of counsellor presence. An intrigue that led me to wonder if cultivating my presence should be an integral part of my method. This introspection prompted me to question whether presence was indeed more imperative than process, and whether upholding my preferred present and relational way of being meant abandoning structured processes altogether. Equally, I found myself pondering, if I choose to follow a structured process, should intentionally cultivating presence become an integral part of my approach, both prior to and during a counselling conversation. This reflective tension gave rise to my research, which seeks to understand how presence can be cultivated within structured therapeutic practice. Rather than positioning presence and process as opposing forces, I began to explore how they might inform and enrich one another.

Co-creating languages of connection

My evolving counselling lens increasingly aligns with social constructionist approaches, particularly collaborative conversations. Social constructionism emphasises how our interactions and relationships shape our understanding of the world (Anderson & Gehart, 2007). This perspective values the co-construction of new understanding and respects uniqueness, offering diversity and empowering others to shape their lives (Anderson, 2012). In practice, this has prompted a subtle yet impactful shift in my approach: rather than applying techniques prescriptively, I have begun to engage with clients in ways that honour their language, values, and unfolding narratives. As Anderson & Gehart (2007) suggest, therapeutic change emerges through dialogic relationships and mutual responsiveness.

My journal entries and vignettes illustrate how this stance, marked by presence, curiosity, and shared meaning-making, can foster deeper insight, emotional resonance, and therapeutic momentum. Appreciating multiple viewpoints within this framework has allowed me to explore how presence and process intertwine in my evolving practice, offering a relational space where meaning is co-created.

Journal entries, documented throughout my clinic year, became a key source of reflection and analysis, helping me trace the development of therapeutic presence in practice. Upon reviewing later journal entries, I noticed several instances where my increased presence seemed to align with collaborative meaning-making. This heightened presence involved being more attentive, engaged, and emotionally connected during interactions. As a result, these interactions appeared to foster more meaningful and productive collaborations with clients, where we could co-create meaning and share understanding.

After observing these particular instances of heightened and collaborative meaning-making, I began questioning whether cultivating presence is a solo responsibility or something that organically unfolds within the collaborative relationship. This latter perspective is supported by Geller and Greenberg (2012), who argue that while individual presence involves the counsellor's attunement and mindfulness, the co-creation of presence emerges from mutual, interactive processes in which both counsellor and client contribute to the therapeutic experience.

Therefore, this study is rooted in my journey with presence and my experiences as an evolving counsellor who values genuine connections. I hope to explore the significance of presence in fostering collaborative relationships and scrutinise the factors influencing its efficacy. Initially, I wondered if cultivating and sustaining presence should be an intentional pursuit in counselling conversations. As I delved into the literature and reflected on my practice, my research questions began to take shape: How is presence intentionally cultivated, both individually and within collaborative relationships? What barriers might exist to sustaining presence? Is presence more valuable than specific techniques in creating meaningful connections?

To further understand these questions and how they intersect with my own experience, relevant literature on therapeutic presence; presence versus process, presence and intentionality, and the co-construction of presence will be examined in the sections to follow.

Methodology: Auto-ethnographic research

Autoethnography, as explained by Ellis et al. (2011), is not just a research and writing method; it is a transformative approach that delves into personal experiences within sociocultural contexts, boldly challenging conventional research techniques while asserting that research is an inherently political and socially aware endeavour. It is an autobiographical genre that intricately weaves personal narratives with contextual meaning-making (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As a postmodern methodology, autoethnography invites the researcher to inhabit the tensions between personal narrative and cultural discourse.

Spry (2001) and Fine (1998) underscore the vital importance of the researcher's voice in this process. Autoethnographic narratives can manifest in diverse forms, including introspective journals, compelling stories, or expressive poetry, all aimed at illuminating personal revelations and transformative moments. Furthermore, this approach offers the opportunity to test tightly held beliefs and assumptions, demonstrating that autoethnography can be evocative, emotional, and rich in description. As Ellis et al. (2011) suggest, it is through layered reflexivity that we begin to see how our stories are shaped by, and in turn shape, the cultural landscapes we move through.

Despite the initial challenges and the vulnerability that comes with self-exploration, I found the opportunity to engage deeply in both reflexive and reflective thinking very rewarding. This methodology, though new to me, offered invaluable insights that I came to appreciate during my contemplations. I soon settled into the opportunity to engage in self-dialogue, examine my existence, and understand my experiences through autoethnography. It became a chance to place myself at the heart of my story (Finlay, 2002), and to critically assess my biases, firmly held beliefs, and appreciate diverse viewpoints.

To ensure methodological rigour, I grounded my reflections in established autoethnographic practices, drawing on academic literature, theoretical frameworks, and transparent analytic processes (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008). My approach was intentionally structured to explore the relational and cultural dimensions of therapeutic presence, rather than relying on anecdotal narrative. This process aligns with the view that autoethnography, when thoughtfully applied, offers a credible and richly contextualised lens for exploring lived experience within therapeutic practice (Chang, 2008).

This exploration reflects my journey as I engage with personal experience and literature, specifically examining the significance of therapeutic presence as a relational, context-sensitive phenomenon. It lays the foundation for deeper inquiry into how presence is cultivated, sustained, and experienced within structured counselling practice.

Methods

Data was gathered from journal entries over a 10-month period of reflection. These entries documented my experiences as a counsellor, a member of a reflecting team, and during post-session debriefs. I also reflected on conversations with clinic supervisors, counselling clients, mentors, and peers. The journal entries delved into my reflections on the intentional cultivation of therapeutic presence, how I nurture and maintain this presence, its co-constructed nature, and its value relative to technique or approach.

Throughout the journaling process, I engaged in ongoing reflection, noting emotional responses, theoretical insights, and client interactions as they emerged. These entries later formed the basis of my data analysis, where I reviewed moments that highlighted the impact of therapeutic presence. Key themes included deep client connection, challenges in sustaining presence, and the balance between presence and structured processes. I also observed how increased presence facilitated collaborative meaning-making, with clients and I co-constructing insights during our interactions. These patterns informed a narrative that explores the dynamic interplay between presence, relational depth, and therapeutic structure.

Helps (2017) posits that scrutinising our thought processes reshapes how we engage with our thoughts, opening us to alternative perspectives and explanations. Over the past 10 months, my journal reflections have been a constant source of self-questioning. By examining these entries, I was able to identify patterns and insights that informed my understanding of therapeutic presence and its role in fostering meaningful connections and collaborative meaning-making with clients.

One reflective account revealed a moment of therapeutic tension that appeared to be shaped by the client's culturally embedded understanding of self and emotional experience. This insight highlighted how therapeutic presence must be attuned not only to relational dynamics, but to the cultural frameworks that shape how clients make meaning. These reflections illustrate how cultural contexts emerged not only as theoretical considerations, but as lived, relational dynamics within practice.

To shed light on my experience, I offer four vignettes that chronicle my journey with therapeutic presence, intentionality, and process. These vignettes aim to explore the subtleties of therapeutic presence, its influence on the therapeutic relationship, and the deliberate use of this intervention. Through reflection and analysis of these vignettes, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how therapeutic presence contributes to a meaningful and effective therapeutic encounter. These vignettes capture my own musings and reflections, rather than detailing observations of clients and their reactions (Humphreys, 2005).

Therapeutic Presence in Practice: A Reflexive Exploration

Presence Versus Process

Balancing presence and process has been a continual challenge for me. While structured processes like narrative and solution-focused therapies provide a useful guide, true presence has at times required stepping away from rigid frameworks (Norcross & Guy, 2007; Hayes et al., 2011). My journal entries often reveal the tension between following a structured approach and being authentically present. I recall specific instances where deviating from a strict process led to more meaningful and impactful sessions, underscoring the importance of presence in my therapeutic work (Geller & Greenberg, 2012). Similarly, adhering strictly to a process at times hindered my presence. I noted my struggle to follow the unfolding conversation while maintaining a clear process such as solution-oriented or narrative therapy (Anderson & Gehart, 2007; Shamoon et al., 2017).

My journal reflections mirrored my evolving understanding of presence, aligning with early pioneers like Rogers, May, and Bugental, and my own clinical experiences. These sparked the realisation while presence allows for genuine connection and adaptability, a structured process also provides necessary guidance during sessions. Therefore, finding a balance where presence and process work together felt crucial, ensuring the therapeutic environment remains flexible and responsive to clients' needs while providing a structured framework (Norcross & Guy, 2007; Hayes et al., 2011; Geller & Greenberg, 2012). During my clinical experience, I shared my interest in exploring how to achieve this, wondering if mastering a balance would apply to all counselling conversations, a transferable skill that could enhance various therapeutic approaches (Anderson &

Gehart, 2007; Shamoon et al., 2017). Approaching therapy from a collaborative perspective, as advocated by Anderson (2012), supported me in feeling that I had, at times, found this balance. Collaborative therapy emphasises co-constructing meaning with clients, fostering a therapeutic alliance that allows for both structured guidance and genuine presence. This perspective aligns well with my experiences and reflections on balancing these two essential aspects of therapy.

Geller and Greenberg (2012) suggest that balancing the counselling process with nurturing the therapeutic relationship is a delicate endeavour, requiring a mix of guiding the process and being genuinely present. Gergen & Ness (2016) add that this balance is inherently co-constructed, emerging from shared relational dynamics. Every client's unique needs and context demand a tailored therapeutic approach, emphasising the dynamic and collaborative nature of therapy where meaning and outcomes are co-created – delicate balancing act indeed.

Presence and Intentionality

Reflecting on my early counselling conversations in the clinic, I often felt constrained by rigid adherence to processes and doubting my abilities. Internally, I grappled with self-doubt, and feelings of stress, and externally, I was challenged by the unique clinic setting and strictly adhering to a therapy process (Shamoon et al., 2017). Norcross & Guy (2007) and Hayes et al. (2011) argue that sustaining presence throughout a counselling conversation involves overcoming such challenges. Geller & Greenberg (2012) argue that counsellor intentionality is vital to maintaining therapeutic presence, encompassing mindful preparation, attunement during sessions, and post-session reflection.

I vividly remember moments of deep connection with clients, where I was fully immersed in our conversation and feeling attuned to their experience. Conversely, when I experienced a feeling of less presence, it did seem to coincide with more shallow connections and missed opportunities for deeper insight and engagement (Cooper & McLeod, 2011).

This prompted me to seek strategies to bolster my presence, such as mindful breathing and body scans, which are recommended to stay present, reduce distractions, and fully engage with clients (Brown, 2012). Grounding myself with breath became a pivotal practice, allowing me to observe my thoughts without being hijacked by them. My curiosity further grew as I noticed how such practices enhanced my presence, notes I shared with my clinical supervisor.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) link counsellor presence to mindfulness practices, enhancing emotional regulation and deepening therapeutic work (Harris, 2009; Geller & Greenberg, 2023). These approaches helped me appreciate how intentionality and embodied awareness can support therapeutic presence.

While I found these strategies supportive, Gergen (2009) cautions that focusing solely on individual practices risks overlooking the relational and contextual dimensions crucial to therapeutic presence. He argues that internal states such as self-doubt are influenced by broader social contexts, suggesting that reflective practices should consider both individual and relational aspects (Gergen & Ness, 2016). Anderson (1997) concurs, suggesting these challenges often arise within the therapeutic relationship.

Similarly, external challenges can also be shaped by social and cultural contexts, such as adhering to a clear process, or environmental distractions are more reflective of broader societal values (Anderson & Gehart, 2007). This understanding led me to reevaluate my solo approach, to consider aspects of relational and socially aware practices and to foster ethical and collaborative client engagement (Anderson, 2012).

Integrating these insights, I began to appreciate that sustaining therapeutic presence involves a dynamic interplay between individual practices and relational contexts. By acknowledging and addressing both, could I create a more inclusive and effective therapeutic environment?

Presence and the Co-Construction

Geller & Greenberg (2012) highlight that while individual presence focuses on the therapist's attunement and mindfulness, co-constructed presence arises from mutual, interactive processes between therapist and client. As an evolving counsellor, my practice framework emphasises staying true to my authentic way of being (Fife, 2014). Overlooking the relational and constructed nature of presence contradicts my developing practice within a social constructionist framework, where meaning is co-constructed and shared collaboratively.

Delving deeper into my journal entries, I began to see how meaning and presence can be co-constructed through conversations and mutual influence (Gergen, 2009). Noticing my increased presence often coincided with collaborative, co-constructed meaning-making with clients. Anderson (2012) argues that collaborative practice respects each person's uniqueness and values their knowledge, creating new understanding together. He terms this process "with-ness", working together, sharing perspectives, and collectively building understanding (Anderson & Gehart, 2022). Instead of imposing answers, collaboration involves curiosity and mindful questioning to help clients explore and expand their life stories (Gehart, 2022; Dickerson, 2010). Counsellor presence is seen as crucial for fostering such collaboration, distinct from merely applying techniques (Tannen & Daniels, 2010; Keeney & Keeney, 2012).

Postmodern approaches, such as narrative and solution-focused therapies, emphasise presence in co-constructing meaning (Anderson, 1997). The presence of the counsellor is key in collaborative conversations (White, 2007; Fromme, 2011), making therapy more inclusive and responsive (Schon, 1983). Attuned counsellors help clients resist oppressive narratives and construct new stories of resilience and hope (White & Epston, 1990; Morgan, 2000; Freedman & Combs, 1996). Malet et al. (2022) describe this as "attentional receptivity" to the client's unfolding experience.

I noted the alignment of postmodern approaches with full engagement and attentive listening to the client's narrative (White & Epston, 1990). This led me to consider the dynamic interplay between presence and counselling process, particularly within social constructionist approaches like narrative, solution-oriented, and collaborative therapies.

The following four vignettes are drawn from my autoethnographic journal, supervision notes, and reflecting team discussions. As part of the data collected over the 10-month research period, they offer brief contextual glimpses into my evolving relationship with therapeutic presence.

Vignette One: Be Here Now

During an early clinic experience, I had the chance to be the primary counsellor in a session, with my peers and our clinic supervisor observing behind the mirror. I felt optimistic that my natural way of being and my full presence would seamlessly integrate into this setting, allowing me to be fully attentive and present with my client. This optimism was soon challenged as I began, eager to impress my peers and supervisor, and skillfully apply a narrative therapy technique. Partway through the initial conversation with the client, I found myself trying to externalise their identified problem—a key narrative therapy method where the problem is seen as separate from the person (White & Epston,

1990). Yet, the client responded by questioning the separation of their anxiety, which they saw as very much a part of their identity.

In hindsight, I began to wonder whether the client's response reflected a culturally embedded understanding of self, one in which anxiety was not something to be separated, but rather integrated into their identity and lived experience. Narrative therapy's emphasis on externalising problems may not have aligned with the client's worldview, which could have been shaped by cultural norms around emotional ownership, personal responsibility, or holistic identity. This moment highlighted for me how therapeutic presence must be attuned not only to relational dynamics, but to the cultural frameworks that shape how clients make meaning.

At other moments in the conversation, when the client similarly offered responses that veered away from my process, I found myself feeling confused and unsure of how to proceed. Finding myself resorting to a check-in felt like the only viable option, asking the client something like, "Is this a useful direction for us to go?" The degree of relief I felt after our conversation came to an end, was surprisingly significant.

During my debrief with the reflecting team after the session, I mulled over why the conversation had felt so awkward. Why had I missed chances to collaborate or ask relevant questions? Why was it so hard to keep track of where we were going? Was it my anxiety about being observed by my peers and supervisor? Or the process? Had my strict adherence to this overshadowed my presence and the natural flow of the conversation? Keeney & Keeney (2012) warn that rigid adherence to a therapy model can stifle a counsellor's ability to be fully present and effective. They argue that embracing uncertainty, focusing on clients' situational contexts, and shedding theoretical attachments can foster a dynamic, adaptive therapeutic process driven by ongoing, reciprocal interactions. Noting my lack of presence seemed to create a disconnect, and acknowledging my own confusion, I wondered if the client had felt the same, highlighting the need for a more genuine engagement (Rogers, 1957).

This realisation marked the beginning of my research into the importance of counsellor presence, sparking my curiosity about the interplay of presence and process.

Vignette Two: A Matter of Balance

As the primary counsellor mid-way through the clinic year, I had the opportunity to work with a client couple. I went into the session with a clear intention to cultivate and maintain my presence by grounding myself throughout our conversation. I was also excited to experiment with a new approach,the Solution Focused Brief Therapy Diamond developed by Connie & Froerer (2023). I had decided to ask fewer questions, to hold the process a little lighter, and to create more distance between my questions, to hopefully offer the clients time enough to fully consider them.

Settling into my new approach, I noticed at times unhelpful inner chatter creeping in. I found myself doubting the "space" that we sat in after some of my questions, questioning myself on the relevancy of my inquiry, or if the clients appreciated the reflections they were encouraged to make. On recognising my inner chatter, I consciously decided to acknowledge it and let it pass without being fully taken away or disrupted by it, refocusing my attention on the clients and their responses.

During my post-session reflections with my clinic supervisor, I reflected on what had transpired. I shared my ability to acknowledge my doubt and let it go. I further acknowledged that the space did seem to support deeper reflection, as I had intended, most evident perhaps from the insights the clients shared afterward. I also noted how adopting a slower, more measured pace supported a new balance between following a process and being present. This felt like a crucial development in my practice. Was I more than just a good conversationalist? Was I becoming what Michael White (2007) referred to as influential, in actively listening and asking insightful questions to uncover the client's unique knowledge and abilities? I finally felt I had maintained a balance between my presence and my approach, in a way that felt effective.

In my later journal entries, I likened this experience to a therapeutic dance, where presence and process complemented each other, much like dancers needing both rhythm and technique. I noted times when I felt more present and attuned, following the client's lead, listening deeply, holding space, and asking questions relevant to their experience. This collaboration feels comparable to a well-timed dance, moving in sync with purpose and rhythm, elegantly navigating the therapeutic space together. Conversely, when I am in the room but not fully present or attuned, it feels comparable to stepping on the clients' toes instead of mutually flowing together. I imagine a waltz where one partner is distracted, out of sync, or preoccupied those missteps disrupt the dance. Let's dance!

Vignette Three: The Individual and the Co-construction

Toward the end of the clinic year, I aimed once again to experiment with a more collaborative approach. Instead of rigidly sticking to following a process, I again planned to ask fewer but more impactful questions and let the client's story unfold naturally. Anderson (2012) champions this approach, noting that collaborative practice respects individual uniqueness and values the knowledge born from collective creation.

During one session, my client was trying to share a significant life event but was at a loss as to how they could. I invited them to use a metaphor to express their feelings, and they compared their journey to a river, sometimes serene, sometimes turbulent. The client's metaphor became our shared language, guiding the rest of our conversation and fostering a deeper mutual understanding. Angus and McLeod (2004) suggest that metaphors in counselling help co-construct meaning by providing a common language, making complex emotions easier to express. This shared language can nurture a richer, more nuanced connection between counsellor and client, ultimately leading to narratives that truly resonate with the client's lived experiences (Angus & McLeod, 2004).

During discussions with my clinic supervisor afterward, I noted how the use of a metaphor had facilitated a more collaborative and organic process, allowing the session to flow naturally with meaning unfolding through our shared metaphor and mutual understanding. The client had my full attention, and I was reminded of the importance of flexibility, responsiveness, and co-constructing meaning in counselling, an approach that I have found can often lead to deeper insights and more meaningful engagement.

Gergen et al. (2019) view therapeutic presence as a relational and co-constructed phenomenon, emphasising the importance of interactions and shared experiences between counsellor and client. Reflecting on this, I acknowledged my previous assumptions about presence from an individualistic viewpoint, as solely my responsibility to cultivate and maintain. This perspective had led to feelings of challenge and frustration. Perhaps therapeutic presence is not just the counsellor's sole responsibility to cultivate and sustain. Is it possible it is also co-created? Could presence also unfold moment-to-moment within the collaborative effort between counsellor and client?

Vignette Four: Presence and Process as a Collaboration

In the final weeks of the clinic year, I became increasingly curious about presence as something co-created: less a quality I delivered, and more a shared phenomenon shaped in the space between myself and the client. I wanted to explore how presence and process might work together in more flexible, responsive ways. My intention for one session was to experiment with a narrative therapy frame, but to hold it lightly, allowing space for the client's unfolding story to shape the direction.

During one session, my client spoke of their discomfort with "the unknowns" describing it as standing inside a vast, bottomless space where little felt certain or solid. Their metaphor struck me deeply. Rather than following the expected arc of narrative therapy, thickening alternative storylines or locating unique outcomes, I asked how they had navigated uncertainty in the past (White & Epston, 1990). Their response was rich and evocative, revealing strengths I had not anticipated.

In that moment, I shifted. Rather than staying with narrative scaffolding, I responded with a question more aligned with solution-focused practice, inviting them to consider how those past strengths might support them now (de Shazer & Dolan, 2007). It wasn't a conscious technique switch; it was an instinctive, collaborative move, guided by what was emerging between us.

During post-session reflection and peer discussion, I noticed how my presence became more attuned not by adhering to process, but by letting process follow presence. I had moved between models, not out of confusion, but out of care, guided by the client's language, needs, and unfolding insight. What resulted felt like a shared authorship: a conversation that honoured the client's strengths, made space for uncertainty, and co-constructed new meaning in real time.

This experience further shifted my understanding of presence from something internal and preparatory to something dynamic, relational, and shaped by mutual responsiveness. My therapeutic presence was not static, but rather emergent, an expression of trust in the process and in the relational field. It reminded me that the heart of collaborative work lies not in choosing the "right" technique, but in being fully available to what arises, together (Gergen et al., 2019).

Discussion

Reflecting on my clinic experience and journal entries, I identified the significant theme of counsellor intentionality, deliberate and conscious efforts to maintain presence in sessions through mindful preparation (Anderson, 1997), attunement during interactions (Geller & Greenberg, 2012), and post-session reflection (Schön, 1983). Recognising this intentionality highlights the counsellor's active role in creating a meaningful and dynamic therapeutic environment that resonates with clients' unique narratives (Anderson & Gehart, 2007; Tannen & Daniels, 2010). This level of engagement also brought with it some important tensions. As Barnett (2019) highlights, being deeply engaged in a session can sometimes blur boundaries, compromise confidentiality, or emotionally impact the counsellor. Reflective practice and supervision, as suggested by White and Epston (1990), supported me to stay grounded, particularly in emotionally demanding sessions, and allowed me to show up in ways that felt both real and considered.

While mindfulness and self-reflection are considered beneficial, I began to notice that they sometimes overlook the relational aspect, the experience of presence as something that unfolds in dialogue. This realisation led me to embrace Anderson's (2012) concept of with-ness alongside presence, viewing presence as more dynamic; an interactive process evolving through mutual engagement between counsellor and client. Noticing how my presence increased during the co-construction of meaning with clients supported this position.

At times, it felt like stepping into an uncertain but hopeful space, less about performing a role and more about showing up with my whole self, available to what might emerge. There was a shift when I stopped focusing on "being present" as something internal to manage and instead, began noticing what was happening between us in the room. A perspective aligning with social constructionist ideas that knowledge and reality are co-created through social interactions (Burr, 2015).

For example, when a client offered a reflection and I responded, not with interpretation, but with curiosity about their experience, it felt like we were walking together, building meaning step by step. In those moments, I was not separate from the process; I was in it with them.

I have come to understand this as staying curious during a session, remaining attentive to what's unfolding, rather than anticipating what should happen next. For me, that meant slowing down internally, letting go of the urge to "respond well," and instead asking simple, responsive questions like, "What's that got you thinking?" or "Is this helpful?" It wasn't about doing more but doing less with more awareness. I also found it useful to reflect afterward on what felt mutual or co-created, what moments surprised me or shifted the energy, and to return to those reflections as a learning space.

Yet even this shift raised new considerations. In recognising the co-created nature of presence, I became more attuned to the need for cultural sensitivity and relational transparency. Approaching each encounter with an openness to the client's values, beliefs, and ways of being became central to ensuring our work remained collaborative and respectful (White & Epston, 1990).

Sustaining presence presented challenges. Reflecting on my journal entries, I noticed how internal challenges like self-doubt, and external challenges such as adhering to a clear process and the unique clinic setting, often disrupted my focus. Anderson (1997) suggests that internal challenges arise within the therapeutic relationship; however, it is also argued they are shaped by broader social and cultural contexts (Gergen & Ness, 2016; Anderson & Gehart, 2007). Keeping such perspectives in mind led me to consider reflective practices that address both internal states and relational contexts. Self-placed pressure to perform well heightened my self-doubt and frustration when things did not go as planned. However, reminding myself of the relational nature of presence helped ease this pressure, acknowledging the client's active role in co-creating the experience. Seeking supervision and engaging in reflective inquiry became vital for navigating these tensions with clarity and steadiness (Barnett, 2019).

Finding a balance between counsellor presence and the process has been a continual challenge. I found myself wondering how I can sustain my presence while adhering to my process and wondering too, if mastering this would apply to all counselling conversations, across approaches (Anderson & Gehart, 2007; Shamoon et al., 2017). The research and my experience demonstrated to me that while presence allows for genuine connection and adaptability, having a structured process provides necessary guidance during sessions (Stober & Grant, 2006). I discovered it is potentially less about choosing one over the other and more about finding a balance where presence and process work together, ensuring the therapeutic environment remains flexible and responsive to the client's needs (Stober & Grant, 2006). A balance, as argued by Gergen and Ness (2016), that is co-constructed, arising from mutual relational dynamics.

Much like a dance, they feel inextricably linked. Presence brings emotional depth and connection, while process provides structure and direction. It seems to be a delicate

balancing act, where both elements enhance and support each other in the co-creation of a meaningful therapeutic experience (Cooper & McLeod, 2011). In my own reflections, this balance also touched on questions of safety and containment, particularly for clients navigating uncertainty. The ability to move between presence and process, depending on client needs, felt like an important part of creating a therapeutic experience that was not only dynamic but ethically attuned (White & Epston, 1990).

Approaching presence from a collaborative perspective, as advocated by Anderson (2012), supported me in feeling I can, at times, find this balance. Collaborative therapy emphasises co-constructing meaning with clients, fostering a therapeutic alliance that allows for both structured guidance and genuine presence. This is consistent with my journal entries, which explored my preference for an egalitarian approach to client work, one that feels jointly collaborative and empowering. As Harrison (2013) notes, an intense focus on presence may unintentionally reinforce imbalances between counsellor and client. It was in those emotionally resonant sessions, where my presence felt most impactful, that I became especially mindful of this dynamic. Working with an awareness of power dynamics, both subtle and overt, supported my intention to engage in ways that felt honouring of the client's agency and autonomy (White, 2007; Harrison, 2013).

Reflecting on my experiences and journal entries, my previous assumptions about counsellor presence were challenged by the perspectives of Gergen (2009) and Anderson (2012). This highlighted to me that both individual practices and the counsellor–client interaction are essential to sustaining counsellor presence. For me, presence is more than a technique, it is a foundational aspect of my work, fostering genuine connection and engagement.

My journal entries explored presence as both something cultivated within and shaped between and underscored the importance of mutual engagement and shared responsibility in crafting meaningful therapeutic experiences. Maintaining that kind of presence, I found, depends not only on practice and preparation but on awareness, of power, of pace, of what is said and unsaid, and a willingness to keep showing up as thoughtfully and responsively as I can.

Conclusion

This auto-ethnographic journey has explored my developing relationship with therapeutic presence. As an evolving counsellor, understanding the role of presence in my practice and its impact on the therapeutic process has been important. Reflecting on diverse viewpoints challenged my assumptions and highlighted the crucial role of intentionality, not just in being present but in adapting to clients' needs (Gergen & Ness, 2016; Anderson, 2012). Recognising barriers to sustaining presence prompted reflective practices addressing both relational and contextual factors (Gergen & Ness, 2016; Anderson & Gehart, 2007).

Key learnings included the cultivation of presence both individually through mindfulness and self-reflection, and collaboratively through engagement and mutual influence (Anderson, 2012). Insights challenging earlier assumptions I held about presence residing solely within the counsellor, proposing instead that presence is a relational, co-constructed phenomenon, shaped by both counsellor and client. This re-conceptualisation invites a shift beyond self-focused embodiment toward mutually responsive engagement.

My research suggests that presence and process can complement each other, with presence fostering genuine connection and techniques providing structure. A balance I view as akin to a dance, where emotional depth and structure work together in a context-dependent manner. Embracing this co-constructed dynamic has alleviated pressure, allowing me to be more genuine and connected in my practice. My belief in the power of presence was reaffirmed as an essential element of the therapeutic relationship. Moving forward, I feel committed to refining this balance, ensuring that my presence and my process harmoniously create a therapeutic environment where clients feel seen, heard, and supported with their unique stories and presentations.

While these insights emerged from my personal journey, they may hold relevance beyond my own practice. For counselling educators, the reconceptualisation of presence as relational and co-constructed invites a pedagogical shift, from teaching presence as a static skill to fostering it as a dynamic, responsive capacity shaped within the therapeutic relationship. Practising counsellors may find value in reflecting on how presence emerges not only from within, but through attunement to client cues and mutual influence. Theoretically, these insights challenge individualistic framings of presence and align with dialogical, intersubjective models of practice. Rather than offering definitive conclusions, I hope this work encourages others to reflect on their own evolving relationship with presence and the ways it is shaped, shared, and sustained in the therapeutic space.

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