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THE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE OF HELPING A PERSON TO MAINTAIN ADEQUATE SELF-RELATION

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ABSTRACT

As part of an effort to understand the specific character of a person's self-referencing treatment, the present study assesses the impact of the practitioner's facility on the self and the self-related process within helping relationships. An aim of the study is to process and develop the reflective practice of helping a person to maintain adequate 'self-relation' with him or herself. A case study research method was assigned to form a single whole of reported helping and supportive work with one participant. This was a useful approach to consider a person's subjective accounts of experienced self-referring treatment within 'encounter' relationships and to consider themes rather than research data.

This study explores some essential qualities of a self-relational process through research interview: (a) the cohesion of internalised 'selfobjects' (thoughts, sensations, images, and desires); (b) the constancy of these 'selfobjects' to the experience of reorganising the self; and (c) the degree to which the 'selfobjects' change in response to changes in circumstances (resilience). Some basic conditions of providing the help and support within the participant's self-relational process are described in terms of the exploration of practitioner's attempts to assist these qualities. The findings indicate some basic propositions towards the understanding of a person's adequate 'self-relation'. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: constructive development, counselling and therapeutic practice, self-relation, self, selfobject, reflective practice, self-relational process.

Of the many who have looked at the relationships between the self-relation phenomenon and the personality, none has, as yet, produced a definite answer to the apparently simple question 'Does a person maintain adequate self-relation with him- or herself?'

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The psychological literature uses illustrations for examining the 'sense of self' (Myers, 1969; Strawson, 1999b;) and the 'self-related process' (Cross, et al., 2000; Cross, et al., 2002) of a person, with a wide range of positive outcomes for physical, emotional and mental well-being (Khan, 1974; Kohut, 1971; Winnicott, 1988), psychological health (Maslow, 1999) and constructive personality development (Rogers, 1951). Whereas some may believe that including the self as the subject or object of one's own self-referencing treatment comes with a good sense of healthy 'self-relation', the nature of self-relation phenomenon could not be limited only by appreciation of a person's affective significance (positive or negative) of the *self*.

So, it has been suggested that the nature of self-relation phenomenon should be considered as a sense of a person's *cohesion*, *constancy*, and *resilience* in relation to his or her own self. This could imply the person's subjective feeling of harmonious, successful and uninhibited (spontaneity) functioning (Maslow, 1999), and could indicate the way of a person's self-referencing treatment which is consistent or congruent with his or her physical, emotional and mental well-being. In keeping with this idea, the term 'adequate' is proposed to identify a 'self-relation' as it is given to one's self.

The impetus here is to demonstrate the *plausibility* and *invalidity* of currently existing *absolute* standards or criteria for identifying a person's self-relation. In psychological literature, these criteria are often characterised by such attributes as the accurate (true, right) or correct and good sense of healthy 'self-relation'. It seems that no other human being can possibly determine what sense of healthy 'self-relation' is adequate for any other individual, because this is given to the individual in his or her subjective perceptions of the self which he or she possesses.

Therefore, in present research, the notion of 'adequate self-relation' is proposed as the subjective feeling of harmonious, successful, and uninhibited (spontaneity) functioning, which leads a person to a sense of cohesion, constancy, and resilience. Consequently, to identify a *person's adequate self-relation with him- or herself*, in professional helping and supporting practice, is to discern the given subjective feeling which is so important to the person's constructive development and psychological health.

This study purports to be a personal way to process and develop the reflective practice (Davy, 2004) of helping a person to maintain adequate 'self-relation' with him- or herself. In conducting this research, two main purposes are pursued:
1. To describe a person's adequate self-relation with him- or herself.
2. To identify or discover the sufficient conditions of helping a person to maintain adequate 'self-relation'.
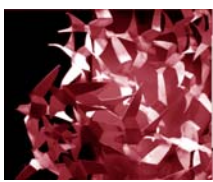
METHOD

Design
In considering the adaptation of a qualitative inquiry, the case study approach as a basic research method is referred to. By choosing a case study research, it has been intended to draw attention in detail to the peculiarities of a single case design which is used first to learn about one's self; and secondly, to highlight the ethical tensions imbued in the execution of professional helping and supporting practice, or a means of evaluating and reporting upon efficacy. Moreover, this method has been used as an act of reviewing the case and writing the narrative case study. This is a helpful process in itself because it forces the researcher, who is conducting the case study research, to distill all the thoughts and memories into a coherent form and to look at themes rather than data (Harris, 2004).

Participants
This case study describes the helping and supportive work between myself and Chris, an adult who has freely offered to take part in my research. The name 'Chris' is not his real name. It is cho-

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sen by the participant at my suggestion to keep to the ethical considerations and confidentiality of the research. My participant, Chris, was kind enough to give his consent to use all the interviewing material. To acknowledge his contribution in my study, I call this study – 'Chris'.
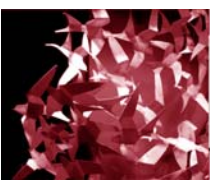
Procedure

In keeping with the narrative format of presenting a case study report (Gillham, 2000a), the research interview has been chosen in order to 'obtain information and understanding of issues relevant to the general aims and specific questions of a research project' (Gillham, 2000b, p. 2). The interview aims to:

• focus on self experience to clarify one's own personal attitudes, values and beliefs,
• participate in a 'self-relational journey' whilst one explores experience,
• gain insight and understanding into one's own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours by looking at relational aspects both inside and outside the self experience,
• identify alternatives for the possible reorganisation of the self within self experience with the expectation of carrying that learning over into one's outside life.

The schedule for the interviewing process has been developed to serve as a guide for investigation providing considerable scope for the participant to influence the direction of the interview (Table 1).

Stage 1
Motivation and Emotional Involvement The participant is encouraged to talk honestly and directly about his or her own self experiences, and the aims and purposes of the interview will be explained during this time. Much emphasis will be placed on the internal relational configurations of the self (internal objects within the self: feelings, emotions, thoughts, sensations, memories, images, concepts and desires), both inside and outside the self experience. The participant will often be asked to share his or her impressions of what he or she knows about him or herself, how he or she appreciates his or her emotional well-being, and possible courses of action or performance towards the self that he or she possesses. These perceptions will be discussed, including both positive feelings as well as other feelings such as irritation or disappointment. The participant is expected to talk about feelings without acting on their feelings.
Stage 2
Processing The researcher's involvement in the on-going process in order to assist the participant in 'story-telling'. The participant will be encouraged to offer support and provision with the reflecting, exploratory and information-seeking responses; to share associations and thoughts which tend to lead him or her to what is significant. The main task for the researcher at this stage is to 'foster' the participant to speak of the immediately experienced internal relational configurations of the self that come from within, rather than in the direct stimulation of thoughts and feelings by the researcher; and to facilitate the insight and understanding by linking the past and present self-experience.
Stage 3
Evaluation and Learning The participant is invited to evaluate his or her self-relational process and to reflect on what he or she has processed during the research interview. The principal task for the researcher is to encourage the participant to identify alternatives for the possible reorganisation of the self within self-experience, with the expectation of carrying that learning over into his or her outside life.

Table 1. Schedule for the interviewing process*Data Analysis*

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The interview lasts between one, and one and a half hours. All the interviewing data is audio-taped and then stored on 'hard' and electronic copies of transcripts. The data has been processed by the use of Wolcott's triad approaches to the analysis or transforming of qualitative data: description, analysis, and interpretation (Wolcott, 1994 in Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, pp.8-9). The descriptive account of the qualitative data holds to underlying assumption that data should speak for themselves. The analytical account stays close to the data as they are originally recorded. The question here is 'What is going on?' (*ibid.*). the analysis in this context is the process by which the researcher expands and extends data beyond a descriptive account. This requires to identify the essential features and relationships of the phenomenon that are interested in. The interpretive account of qualitative data is considered as one's own interpretation of what is going on during the thinking and writing narrative case study research. At the stage of the 'coding frame' procedure the meaningful fragments of interview transcript data have been identified and then organised, managed and retrieved by linking them to the particular themes or concepts.

RESULTS

My work with Chris has indicated some issues which are immediately related to the interpreted patterns of subjective data. However, here my attempt has been made at distilling all the thoughts and memories into a coherent form and considering themes rather than data (Harris, 2004). In conducting this case study, I have experienced that I am more authentic and the study is less about proving me. On the contrary, it is more about being focused on the self-relational needs of my participant, Chris. As a result of this understanding, I conceive that my case has provided the learning both about Chris's relation with himself and also about myself as a research-practitioner. Consequently, two themes or issues might be raised for discussion. My first intention is to describe the subjective evidences of how Chris maintains his adequate self-relation. Secondly, I shall attempt to review myself in the context of research relationships, where I have operated as *being with* my participant, Chris, rather *doing to* him (Schmid, 2001b; Geller & Greenberg, 2002).

Subjective evidences of adequate self-relation

In my work with Chris, I have attempted to discern the subjective feeling of harmonious, successful, and uninhibited (spontaneity) functioning, which, according to my interpretation of Maslow's statement above, leads Chris to a sense of cohesion, constancy, and resilience, and, consequently, to construct and constitute the meaningfulness of the notion 'adequate self-relation'. A range of descriptions of the given subjective feeling is offered by Chris in his 'story-telling', which has provided a background for the material associated with the practice of maintaining a person's adequate self-relation.

The harmonious functioning. This concept, in a context of Chris's self-referencing treatment, was seen as the forming of a pleasing and consistent whole of internal relational configurations of his self (Kohut, 1971) or, in other words, the 'selfobjects'. For instance, he said of himself that: "when I talk about myself, I'm talking about the whole, which is made up of parts. I don't think those parts in themselves have a clear structure, in terms of categories. I don't think I can categorise myself because it's such a web of multidimensional relationships with the whole background to my life".

In following his description, it was seen that Chris paid much attention to his thoughts, sensations, images, and memories which were organised in accordance with his affective significance of those 'selfobjects' that was predominantly positive or *desirable*. Moreover, I observed that he was talking about those 'selfobjects' as not only his intrinsic particular personal qualities, but the functions they performed on his self. He exemplified this as: "when I say that I am a 'loving person' that's a kind of holistic trait for me, I certainly don't act in a loving way, all of the time. So, part of that is
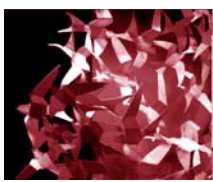
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related to what I think I am, as well as how I would like to be seen, and there's a mix of that and because those traits are particularly important to me. And those traits are important to me for more than just the reason that they are what I associate myself to be. They're important to me because they are also my values".

The successful functioning. Something that was often referred to by Chris as 'the kind of dispositions I have towards this [self-experience] right now, which are products of my past' was a sense of accomplishing a desired change. This concept, in a context of therapeutic relationships, is used to refer to the experience of reorganising the self (Rogers, 1951) or to bring the self into existence (Winiccott, 1980). An account of an experience involving reorganisation was given by Chris: "while I was growing up, I would quite often be called a 'selfish child'. Now, I think I took that in, and started to believe that as part of my personality, as part of my attitude, that I was selfish. And also I absorbed the value judgement that being selfish is bad and wrong. So I've had to work with that in relationships with significant others. It has been very important […] to look at what it means to be selfish, and actually I found what it means. […] I understand what was meant as me being selfish as a child was actually about me being egocentric, about the whole world revolving around me. […] I don't relate to myself now as a selfish person at all, but I also remember that when I was being told I was being selfish as a child I felt disgust, I felt shame and guilt because not only was that a label given to me by my parents, at times. It was also something that I'd learned from them was very undesirable and I would occasionally feel guilty for that, feel disgusted at myself for that, and on other occasions, feel shame for that. […] I've therefore changed in terms of seeing that in terms of a negative, individualist, selfish thing, to something that just … is. It most certainly doesn't mean for me that I can't act in ways that are ethical and are socially responsible, and about other people, but it does mean that I make sense of them, in relation to me. So that's one example of the work that I've had to do, to undo something, which was negative for me […]".

It seems to me that this account is clear evidence of Chris's feeling of successful functioning that has indicated the accomplishment of his desired change. This was possible due to the binding together of past experiences, potentialities, and the present moment awareness, and expectancy for the future (Winiccott, 1980).

The uninhibited (spontaneity) functioning. Providing Chris with a state of 'being with' him rather 'doing to' him (Schmid, 2001a, 2003; Geller & Greenberg, 2002) in his 'story-telling', I was looking for some evidences of thoughts which would be expressed unselfconsciously and without restraint. For me, it was an important element in sustaining and giving meaning to Chris's state of 'genuineness' within on-going self-relational treatment. This concept was represented by such Chris' thoughts as: "In terms of a space to talk about me, that makes me happy, it makes me interested, it makes me curious to learn more about myself. But I also feel a little bit frustrated as well, because […] there may seem to be overlapping ideas, where one thing, on the face of it, may seem to contradict another thing, and I'm aware that, in some cases, those are areas of confusion and disintegration for me, and I would like to explore them. […] And as time goes on, I become less frustrated about my relationship with myself, because I understand myself more […] and have compassion for myself more. And I'm also comfortable with uncertainty, so I'm comfortable, because I take a multiple reality framework and because I don't think that "self" is one thing to be discovered. […] I don't think of myself as one thing that is unchanged and discoverable. I think there are aspects of myself which change all the time depending on where I am and that I will also never know. […] Obviously it depends moment to moment, on how I look at things, but I now have a great deal of self-compassion, and a healthy sense of self-love. To be able to balance my needs in relation to other people's needs, and find, or attempt to find that balance between what I need, and what somebody else needs, in whatever situation it is. And to be able to say, well the right course of action is the course of action that takes care of myself […]. And, that was about trying to learn to take care of myself […]".

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Whilst the meaningfulness of adequate self-relation was offered by descriptions of Chris's subjective feeling of harmonious, successful, and uninhibited (spontaneity) functioning, it was seen that in experienced self-referring treatment, Chris represented some essential qualities of a self-relational process. They are the cohesion of internalised 'selfobjects' (thoughts, sensations, images, and desires); the constancy of these 'selfobjects' to the experience of reorganising the self; and the degree to which the 'selfobjects' change in response to changes in circumstances (resilience).

The use of self in the context of helping relationships

Responding to Chris' accounts, I was very aware that whatever changes the 'shared space' (Cox, 1980), in terms of my helping relationships with Chris, underwent, I endeavoured to provide him with genuine and congruent responses which were authentic and consistent with me as a real person with likes, dislikes, beliefs, and opinions (Klein, et al., 2001). Whereas in my research, primarily attention was paid to Chris's self-referencing treatment of himself, in the actual encounter relationships, I was wondering about how my engagement in Chris' experienced self-relational process was appreciated by him. Chris viewed raising such an issue as being akin to making the assumption of 'relationality': "You can never experience […] what it's like for me to experience me […] as a whole. What you can do is draw on […] aspects of how you experience yourself and aspects of how I experience me, and put them together, and between us, have an experience of that. So, you're able to […] have experience of the in-between, but completely and as a whole, you cannot experience me, and I cannot experience you".

However, while he shared a concern to understand the 'relationality', there were differences in how this occurred: "So to go back to my analogy about what's happening with you, and what's happening with me, and what's in-between, those are three things for me, not two things. The "what's happening in-between" is different to "what's happening within me", and "what's happening within you", in my understanding. I'm just aware of the harm that could be caused if I'm not being a separate, self-aware, responsible person, in this contact, and that's really important for me. Because otherwise, I might have, my answers might be reflecting needs that I have from you, as opposed to being my answers. So it's very important for me, that I understand my part in this, as two separate selves, who are prepared to explore the in-between".

Reviewing myself in a research relationships context was seen as the post-experimental inquiry (Meltzoff, 1998) which was a helpful supplement to find out how I profited by my experience to guide Chris through his self-referring treatment, what contributions I made by bringing my own self into Chris's self-relational experience and how that appeared to Chris. This was also a helpful process to understand whether the use of self in 'encounter' relationships (Schmid, 2001a) would cause any potential risks in a research relationships context both for me and for Chris.

In my reflections on the experience of working with Chris, I have observed that, being involved in his processing self-relational experience, I appeal to my subjectivity and lived experience as 'trustworthiness' or 'credibility for others' (Schmid, 2001a). I have felt uneasy about using the research techniques, worrying that helping Chris on an operational and technical sense (Rogers, 1951) could seem the same as dismissing his experience as 'just stories' (Davy, 2004). Hence, in responding to Chris's accounts, I have implicitly provided bridges between my subjective experiences of 'self-relation' and the shared environment, in which subjectivity, both mine and Chris's, have been constructed. This has helped me to develop different sensitivities and, consequently, possibilities for responsible and trustworthy action.

I also have found that the actual dynamics of the case study plays a supportive role (Stake, 2005) in my understanding of how its two active agents (me as a conductor of research and Chris as a subject of research whose self-relational experience is reported) experience the research. Therefore, attempting to facilitate the helping relationships and process with Chris's self-relational experience, I have also been forced to consider these types of issues in relation to myself within the

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supervisory relationship. Some implications arising from these issues I have assigned to what occurs to me in conducting the case study research.

Finally, I should say that I considered my work to be successful and this helped me be less defensive about possible mistakes I might have made. I enjoyed thinking about the case, because I had an opportunity to examine what I actually was able to learn, rather than to contribute to the case.

DISCUSSION

This study provides a personal way to process and develop the reflective practice of the adaptation of such a qualitative inquiry as a person's 'adequate self-relation'. As such, some reflective findings from conducting this case study research might form a single whole, of reported helping and supportive work which I processed with my participant, Chris.

Being engaged in the participant's self-relational process as a research-practitioner, I experienced the two levels of the self-relational process. They were (a) the relationships I was in, providing the assistance of the participant's self-referencing treatment through 'story-telling', and (b) the relationships I was within my subjectivity and the lived experience of my own 'self-relation'. The awareness of being in relationships with the participant's experience of self-referencing treatment and with my own experience helped me to reflect on what was occurring with and between the two people in the helping relationships.

An unexpected finding within the encounter relationships was that the self-relational process had been associated by my participant with "two separate selves, who [were] prepared to explore the 'in-between'". According to his account, one is able to have experience of the 'in-between' or "what's happening in-between" and cannot experience "what's happening within me", and "what's happening within you". This led me to think about the role of the significant amount of unshared experiencing within the 'shared space' (Cox, 1988), in the helping practice of maintaining a person's adequate 'self-relation'. Reflectively, I questioned whether this unshared experiencing was a necessary part of the overall process of self-referencing treatment, both to me and also to my participant, or it served to hinder or prevent deeper levels of contact (Knox, 2007) with the sense of self within the self-related process (Cross, et al., 2002).

The study also indicates that it is possible to study the 'self-relation' phenomenon in connection with a person's subjective perceptions of the self and their affective significance (positive or negative), which identify the personalised way of a self-referencing treatment that is adequate to a person's physical, emotional and mental well-being. This understanding can be very challenging for the practitioners, as it demands to discern the subjective feeling of harmonious, successful, and uninhibited (spontaneity) functioning (Maslow, 1999) which is so important for providing the professional help and guidance of the 'organization and functioning of the self' (Rogers, 1951).

Looking at the person's subjective perceptions of the self is a helpful process in itself, because it facilitates the practitioner's engagement in the person's relational experience in the constituting of the self. As such, this enables the practitioner to discern the subjective feeling of two types of the person's self-relational experience. The first type is when the sense of self comes to a person's experience as an 'object of experience', referring to such 'mental' entities or processes as emotions, sensations, memories, images, thoughts, concepts and desires; and, the second – when the sense of self is perceived as the 'subject of experience', referring to the person's awareness or consciousness of 'selfobjects'. In this concern, the practitioner's attempts ought to be made as to how the person relates him or herself to the 'selfobjects' he or she attends to and what 'selfobjects' the person relates to him or herself.

Considering the internalisation of the object-relationship inside the self, the practitioner is required to regard the internal relational configurations of a person's self (internal objects within the

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self). This enables him or her to observe the external relationship of these 'configurations' that become expressed in a person's affective significance of their perceptions in terms of satisfying or unsatisfying relationships. In keeping with the affective significance of a person's perceptions of his or her internal objects within the self, the practitioner is able to work through a person's emotions, sensations, memories, images, thoughts, concepts and desires of his or her self. It helps to define a person's own tendency to 'reorganisation' and 'disorganisation' of the self within the self-related process, and to foster a constructive organisation and functioning of the self.

The constructive organisation and functioning of the self is associated with the way in which a person's self-referencing treatment is conditioned by 'basic need gratification' (Maslow, 1999) and, therefore, is consistent or congruent with his or her well-being. It makes sense to refer here to the subjective evidences which I have gained from conducting the Chris' case study. An evident finding of this study is that the person maintains his or her self-relation by a means of the subjective feeling of harmonious, successful, and uninhibited (spontaneity) functioning that lead him or her to a sense of:

• cohesion of internalised 'selfobjects' (thoughts, sensations, images, and desires);
• constancy of these 'selfobjects' to the experience of reorganising the self;
• degree to which the 'selfobjects' change in response to changes in circumstances (resilience).

This finding indicates that the adequacy of a person's 'self-relation' is the degree to which the person experiences certain qualities of his or her self-referencing treatment. The given qualities, 'cohesion', 'constancy' and 'resilience', are essential to maintain such a kind of person's relation with him or herself. They are not something that the person knows about him or herself; on the contrary, they are something that is quite uniformly found to be associated with a wide range of positive outcomes for physical, emotional and mental well-being, and constructive personality development.

Another significant meaning for the professional helping and supporting practice, including guidance counselling, of such a qualitative inquiry is the necessary conditions which serve to assist a person's self-referencing treatment:

The first condition is concerned with the practitioner's ability to work through the person's internal relational configurations of the self (internal objects within the self) both inside and outside the self-experience. Working through is a necessary process to help the person to overcome his or her resistance to the disclosure of unconscious 'selfobjects' during the self-referencing treatment. In assisting a person's 'story-telling', the practitioner is required to identify a particular internal object, which seems to be confusing or unclear, within the person's self-organisation.

The next condition is referred to the practitioner's ability to facilitate the person's insight and understanding by linking the past and present 'selfobject experience'. This requires the practitioner to focus on a person's actual self-dependent experience of the self-referencing treatment or, in other words, to encourage his or her functioning of the self. A considerable impact should be made on the person's 'present moment awareness' of the functions 'selfobjects' perform within the operation of the self. These functions might be exemplified by the representation of the personal attitudes, values and beliefs which become incorporated into the person's self structure and provide the self-relational experiences necessary for the organisation of the self. Bringing such functions into a person's self-referencing treatment is also important for assumptions concerning the potential for the reorganisation of the self. It is clear that the functions 'selfobjects' perform are not the actuality of object-relationships but their internal reflections. Therefore, the attitude, value or belief might be regarded as the reflective experience of a person's internal relational configurations of the self (emotions, sensations, thoughts, images and desires). In such a situation, helping practice involving 'functioning of the self' needs to consider some sufficient characteristics for such reflective experience: *flexibility* of any attitudes (values or beliefs) to the self; their *expression* in the sense of a person's satisfaction of him or herself (for instance, positive attitude and/or negative attitude); and *conditionality*, as the certain conditions define the attitudes (values or beliefs) which a person experiences in relation to the self.
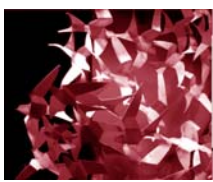
The third condition is that the practitioner should initiate a person's learning of the alternatives for possible reorganisation of the self within self-experience, with the expectation of carrying that learning over into his or her outside life. It means that in working through a person's internal relational configurations of the self, the practitioner helps him or her to gain some measure of control over object-relationships and to get to the root of their affective significance (good/satisfying object or bad/unsatisfying object). In doing this, the person endeavours to conceive how he or she has undergone the *way* in which the 'object experience' evokes the organisation and functioning of his or herself and maintains the continuity of his or her selfhood. Consequently, this process leads him or her to explore the alternatives for possible reorganisation of the self within on-going self-referencing treatment. Such exploration is associated with the person's self-dependent learning and, therefore, enables him or her to carry it over into outside life.
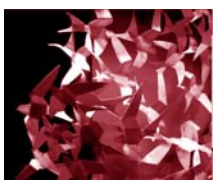
CONCLUSION

Written accounts of the reflective practice of helping a person to maintain adequate 'self-relation' have been represented as the acts of reviewing the case and writing the single case study research. Writing the case study was a helpful process since it provided an opportunity to examine what the research-practitioner actually was able to learn, rather than to contribute to the case. It both helped to shape the development of the processed work and also identified issues in practice that needed to be addressed.

However, the study remains a need for further exploration of issues (findings, propositions) which have some far-reaching implications for the theory and practice of counselling and psychotherapy, and the training of professional helpers in these fields.

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