The Man with the Bag:

An Autoethnographic Exploration into Practitioner Experience of Working in the Activation Paradigm During Ireland's Housing Crisis.

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To Abdullah, Tony, Elena, the Man with the Bag, and all those I have met in practice who are homeless. May you soon find a place to call home.

To all the team at Maynooth University Department of Adult & Community Education: Michael, Brid, Jerry, Camilla & Fergal. In particular, to my Supervisor, Dr Dave McCormack, who continues to nurture, inspire and shape me professionally.

To all the Helpers out there working in the system – keep up the self-care. It's tough working on the frontline.

Last but not least, to my husband and sons, who make coming home the place where I belong, wherever home shall be.

ACRONYMS

AMLP	Active Labour Market Policies
BTEC	Business & Technology Education Council
CAO	Central Applications Office
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DEASP	Department of Employment & Social Protection
DSP	Department of Social Protection
ETB	Education Training Board
FÁS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair: The Training & Employment Agency
HAP	Housing Assistance Payment
JP	Jobseekers Payment
LES	Local Employment Service
MABS	Money Advice & Budgeting Service
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NUIM	National University of Ireland Maynooth
PES	Public Employment Service
PLC	Post Leaving-Cert Course

PTWP   Pathways to Work Policy

SOLAS   An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna, 'Further Education and Skills Service'

UCAS   The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

UK   United Kingdom

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Abstract

This research is a living inquiry into my experience of working as a guidance counsellor, in a contracted government employment service, within the activation paradigm. A housing crisis has engulfed Ireland. The future of the service where I work lies in limbo. It is deeply unsettling times.

Presented in three parts, Part 1 begins in 2017 as a battle, as I struggle to work in a person-centred way, within the closing walls of the neoliberal system in which I work. Charged with making sense of it, I reluctantly open myself up to writing through it, using the methodology of autoethnography as a vehicle for reflexivity. Using evocative vignettes, I share stories of the people I am meeting through the course of my job, documenting the hopelessness and anger I feel towards the system. Contemplating leaving my profession, I seek out a learning space on a M.Ed. Guidance & Counselling programme. Part 2 then lowers me into my education journey and my own story. In Part 3, I reflect upon what I have learned.

My ontological view of the world is that there is value in people's stories. My epistemological perspective is that these stories need to be interpreted, in order to discover the underlying meaning. I am telling the story of my unfolding meaning making through my living inquiry. I am trying to understand the experience I have lived through. Am still living through.
And how autoethnography, story and narrative can play a pivotal role in practitioner reflexivity and development. The narrative method of inquiry, which I used in this research, was narrative writing, as it focused on researching into an experience (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p.50). Narrative writing allows researchers to question internal conditions such as feelings and emotions. I then used the methodology of autoethnography to explore my own emotional experience.

Equipped with a deeper understanding of myself, I can battle onwards in this challenging work, resourced with hope and resilience.

PART 1

PACK YOUR BAGS AND GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE…

- **December 2017 – 'Abdullah'**

I'm in the staff kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil, hoping a cup of tea will provide some relief of sorts. I've had a difficult session with a client earlier and I'm finding it hard to shift him from my mind.   A colleague walks in and joins me by the kettle.

How are things?

I'll be honest, I've had better days….had a tough one in earlier.

Want to chat about it?

Ah…I'm just really struggling these days, especially with this new homeless client group presenting.

I hear you…it's very difficult. I'm listening if you want to talk?

So he is a young man, early 30's with a pregnant wife and two small kids, currently living in hotel emergency accommodation. He had his kids with him. Only babies really – one is six, the other in nappies. Poor guy took two buses across Dublin with the kids to get here, as he was terrified of losing his payment. His wife is pregnant and in hospital. They are Muslim and she was attacked the other day in the city centre - racist attack apparently - got pushed to the ground and is in hospital. The kids were very distressed…and as if all that wasn't bad enough, the hotel where they are staying has asked them to leave in two days so they can honour bookings to tourists over the Christmas holidays. He can't find another hotel with rooms to take them. Ended up just using the space to let him use the phone and make calls to try and find a hotel. I gave the kids some colouring. No luck in finding a hotel today but I've managed to link him in with a Key Worker from a homeless service.

Wow…that is a tough one all right…sounds like you did as much as you could under the circumstances…. you seem to be getting a lot of homeless clients presenting lately.

I am, yeah…and no matter how many I deal with, it never seems to get easier.

How could it? It's tragic.

I'm so glad we have our monthly peer supervision this week. Guess what I'll be talking about?

That's what peer supervision is there for.

Sometimes I just really hate this job…anyway, tell me, how are you doing?

- **Introduction: Setting the Scene**

In the last few years, a new client group has started to present to my practice. They come in a steady stream. Different faces with a similar story.

Without a house.
Without a home.
Without hope.

I am a guidance counsellor (also known by the term Mediator within our service) working with unemployed adults in a contracted Public Employment Service (PES) called the Local Employment Service (LES). It's Dublin, 2018, and a housing crisis has taken its grip on Ireland:

> The scale and complexity of which might suggest a social challenge of insurmountable proportions. (O'Connell, Finnerty, 2018).

From late 2017 onwards, my caseload was filling up with people who were unemployed and homeless, or unemployed and at real risk of homelessness. This unsettled me greatly, and I began to feel a real anger at the system - a system where government Active Labour Market Policies (ALMP) require those who are unemployed to engage in active participation and job search or else risk penalties and loss of social welfare income. I felt I was battling with the incongruence of being trained in a person-centred philosophy yet having to work within the neoliberal paradigm of a public employment service. This battle within me turned to real doubts about my future within the profession.

In October 2018, I embarked upon a learning journey with Maynooth University on a M.Ed. in Guidance & Counselling. As an adult educator I undertook a dual learning journey, professionally and personally, and documented the journey. My research is the story of this experience. I am telling the story of my unfolding meaning making of my learning journey over the past year, within the education space. I took a piece of my world and tried to understand it better.

Using autoethnography as a creative research method, I write my way through my disorienting dilemmas in practice and in my private life, using personal, intimate & embodied writing (Ellis, Bochner 2000, p.6). I both show and tell about autoethnography. The learning spaces provided in Maynooth University Department of Adult & Community Learning allowed me to work through the experience of transformative adult learning. I write about, and in, transformative learning (McCormack et al, 2018).

- **Autoethnography as Methodology**

The ethnographic approach to research emphasises the importance of narrative in telling the person's story. A reflexive research method, autoethnography involves a critical study of yourself, in relation to one or more cultural context(s) (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). Hughes (2017, p. 177) describes it as:

> Both process and product, both art and science, a reflexive research practice that uses the lens of the self (auto) to study, represent, and write (graphy) about people in relation to cultural groups / contexts (ethno).

By writing themselves into their own work as major characters, autoethnographic researchers have challenged accepted views about silent authorship, where the researchers voice is not included in the presentation of findings (Holt, 2003). Authoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness (Ellis, 2004). The text of its writing does not feature the traditional distanced researcher, but is written in the first person, highlighting stories of relationships and emotions affected by social and cultural frameworks. It is described by Ellis and Bochner (2000) as a genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural. McIlveen (2008, p.1) sees autoethnography as:

A reflexive means whereby the researcher-practitioner consciously embeds him or herself amidst theory and practice, and by way of intimate autobiographic account, explicates a phenomenon under investigation.

- **Data, Ethics & Integrity**

As a qualitative research method, autoethnography uses data about self and context, in order to gain knowledge and understanding of the connectivity between self and other, within the same context, combining a mixture of ethnography, biography and self-analysis (Chang, Hernandez, Ngunjiri, 2010). As an autoethnographical researcher, I have centered on the story of my own self, and focused on written descriptions of personal experience. I am both the interviewer and the interviewee. The research data I use is my own writings from personal journals.

My research takes place over a set period of nineteen months – beginning in December 2017 and culminating in June 2019. My research is presented in three parts. Part 1 began at a particular point in history, in December 2017, and the story I tell describes my struggles at work, which were happening at this time. In between telling this story of my experience and setting the cultural climate, I deliberately embed vignettes as evocative narratives in between, which tell the traumatic stories of some of the people I meet, who are homeless or about to lose their homes - Abudullah, Tony, Elena and the Man with the Bag. These vignettes are all placed within my own story, at the particular point in time when I met each person. I met Abdullah in December 2017; Tony in January 2018; Elena in March 2018, and the Man with the Bag in January 2019.

I am an extensive note-taker. I keep a personal journal where I note issues pertaining to my practice. My own journal notes on my experiences and self-awareness are detailed throughout and become my research data. My writings are authentic and genuine. When I started the M.Ed. in September 2019, I made a concerted effort to journal my experiences pertaining to the programme, which I kept for the duration. In Part 2, lowering myself into writing

my own story was a painful process. Never sure of where it was taking me, I trusted the process, and wrote into the mess.

My research is what McCormack (2018) describes as:

> Solidly located within autoethographic methodological practices; the experiences of the self of the researcher being the primary focus for the inquiry, the source of experience from which knowledge emerges. (p. 3).

In order to ensure ethical research, permission and agreement was given by family members (my husband, my eldest son, my mother, & students in the class), to include parts of my personal writings where they are mentioned. The names of the clients have been changed, as have the names of others mentioned. Identifiable factors have been removed and all identifiable details carefully reconstructed.

- **Constructivism: Seeing Value in Peoples Stories**

Constructivism is the philosophical and scientific position that knowledge arises through a process of active construction. Although a number of various perspectives co-exist within constructivism (Piaget, 1966; Von Glaserfeld, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1995) it essentially portrays learners as independent creators and constructors of knowledge, with varying capacity or confidence to rely on their own construction. Fenwick (2003, p. 23) writes that:

> All views share one common central premise: a learner is believed to construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her action in the world. In contrast to earlier views, constructivism shifts from the assumption that learning is 'taking things in', to a view of learners continuously adapting – their interpretations as well as actions – to the situations around them.

Constructivists place emphasis on the world of experience as it is lived, felt, undergone by social actors and are deeply committed to the view that;

> What we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective...with knowledge and truth being created, not discovered by mind. (Schwandt, 1994, p. 236).

As a constructivist, I believe that we are all perspective takers. Autoethnography is aligned to the epistemological basis of social constructivism, which acknowledges the premise that a person's world-view is constructed through their internal frames of reference (Anderson, 2006; Muncey, 2010). Data being produced is filtered through a:

> Personal lens. (Cresswell, 2003, p. 182).

Within my research, I am positioning myself firmly from a constructivist orientation. I am using autoethnography as a qualitative method of reflexive enquiry for narrative research which specifically address the story of the practitioner (McIlveen, 2008) to explore my own social construction of the world. Etherington describes narrative inquiry is a means by which we;

> Systematically gather, analyse, and represent people's stories as told by them, which challenges traditional and modernist views of truth, reality, knowledge and personhood. (2011, p. 3).

As a constructivist, I see value in people's stories. My epistemological perspective is that these stories need to be interpreted in order to discover the underlying meaning. Therefore I am telling the story of my unfolding meaning-making through my living enquiry.

Stories are fundamental to the constructivist approach, with Hartung (2013) describing story as a human universal. At its heart lies individual sense making. The study of narrative is the way that humans experience the world (Clandinin and Connolly, 1990). McCormack (2018) writes that;

> Narrative inquiry as a paradigm of research … sees social inquiry as rooted in "stories lived and told" (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p. 20). Research inquiry in this paradigm gathers the stories by means of which we experience and understand our worlds and mines them for the knowledge that resides in our storied framings of experience.   (p. 3).

The narrative method of inquiry, which I used in this research was narrative writing, as it focused on researching into an experience (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p.50). Narrative writing allows researchers to question internal conditions such as feelings and emotions.   I then used the methodology of autoethnography to explore my own emotional experience.

We are a product of our context. As a guidance counsellor I have to understand the other person's context in order to help them in practice. I am a product of my own context, therefore I need to understand my own context. Because in constructivism, you are the story.

- **Ireland's Housing Crisis**

At the time of writing, Ireland's latest homeless report from the Department of Housing showed the number of homeless adults and children living in state-funded emergency accommodation had risen again (Dept. of Planning Homelessness Report, March 2019).   Figures show there are now 10,305 people recorded as homeless – including 6,484 homeless adults and 3,821 children. It was the third month-on-month increase in the number of people living in emergency accommodation, and the highest number on record since the Department started recording these numbers.

And the numbers continue to rise.

The scale and diversity of the housing problem faced in Ireland, with inadequate and unfair access to rented accommodation, evictions and poor living

conditions can be described as brutal. The roots of Ireland's housing crisis run deep and a radical rethink is required on how housing supply is required in Ireland (Buffachi, 2019). This chronic housing shortage has emerged as a result of the rapid decline of both private and social housing supply (Byrne, Norris, 2016).

In an interview with Dr. Rory Hearne, (November, 2018), John Harris of The Guardian summarised the Irish housing crisis very succinctly:

> The free-market boom that saw Ireland's economy hailed as the Celtic Tiger was partly built on the easy availability of mortgages and a frenzy of house-building and land-buying, both of which fed into the crash of 2008. In its wake, Ireland saw the phenomenon of "ghost estates": housing developments left unfinished as funding suddenly dried up. At the same time, mortgages and property portfolios were sold at knock-down prices to international "vulture funds", which also bought up huge swathes of land that often have been left empty – partly, because scarce land and housing keeps rents and property prices high….In 2014, Ireland began a supposed economic recovery, but you had a private construction industry that had been decimated. You also had a generation coming in who can't get mortgages, and the growth of precarious work. And all these things come together: people who either used to get housing from local authorities, or who bought their home, were now all going into the private rental sector. So, of course, what happened? Rents started shooting through the roof. Homelessness also started to rise. You now see this completely new phenomenon called family homelessness: predominantly lone parents, because lone parents' welfare was cut. Rents are rising, benefits are being cut – and they're being pushed into homelessness.

- **It's The Same Story, Day After Day**

Each person I met had a similar story – pushed out of the private rental market into homelessness and then into the punishing cycle of trying to access HAP – the Housing Assistance Payment. In order to access HAP, you need to have found affordable accommodation and a landlord who agrees to accept this payment – a near impossible task in a market with a huge rental shortage. Private tenancy agreements are a risk – most are short term or for one to two years maximum, so that even if people can source one, they come with no security of long term accommodation. If 'lucky' enough to find a private rental, people end up paying huge portions of their income (or jobseekers payment if unemployed) towards the rent, leaving them struggling to survive on less than the bare minimum income.

The majority of people I meet are living in temporary emergency hotel accommodation, paid for by the local authority until they can find private rented accommodation. This type of accommodation can be terminated at short notice by the hotels to fulfil private bookings. People are finding themselves constantly trying to find a room at the next hotel. You can be placed in a hotel anywhere in your local authority area, rendering it difficult to access children's schools and places of work. According to Focus Ireland (2019), family homelessness has doubled in less than three years, and there are minimum of 100 families chasing hotel rooms across Dublin nightly.

The Focus Ireland reports make grim reading, with one family becoming homeless in Ireland every eight hours: sixty-three per cent of these families are coming directly from private rented accommodation. Family homelessness emerged as a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland in 2014 (Hearne, Murphy, 2017). In the 2019 Ombudsman for Children report *No Place like Home*, the adverse effects of homelessness on families and children have been described as:

A focus of sustained concern … highlighting the damaging impact of homelessness on family life and functioning, on children's education, and on parents. (p. 10).

- **January 2018 – 'Tony'**

Tony was a 55-year-old single man who had lived with is mother all his life. I wondered if Tony been in school today would he have been assessed and found to have a learning disability. He was extremely vulnerable. Tony had worked for the same building provider for 38 years, but was let go during the recession. His mother died around this time also. He had no living relatives and no friends. He was extremely isolated. After many months of slowly gaining his trust, Tony disclosed a variety of health problems, some of which embarrassed him greatly. His GP was female, and he did not know how to speak to her about them. Tony did not know he could ask for a male GP when making an appointment. His literacy skills were poor so he was unable to write down his questions and hand to the GP. Tony was not aware that he could enquire with his GP about his genuine fitness to work, and seek assistance with applications for other social welfare payments such as illness benefit or disability allowance.

Tony had taken out a large 100% mortgage just before the recession to buy the family home, a small flat, which had previously been rented to the family. I discovered that during his 38 years of service with the same employer his salary had barely changed, yet he often worked ten to fourteen hour days. Totally exploited. He brought in a letter from the bank threatening repossession and I put him in contact with MABS (Money Advice & Budgeting Service). He had no idea who MABS were. He had been unable to read the banks letters to him but knowing they were 'bad news' he had stopped opening them, afraid to find out what was really going on.

It took seven meetings with Tony over the space of 7 months to gain his trust to start to even gather this information. The system under which I work states that after a period of 12 months, Tony would be referred back to DEASP to be interviewed on why he had not progressed to work,

training or education. Instead of agreeing a monthly Personal Progression Plan (PPP) outlining Tony's efforts to find work or suitable training, I spent the time gently gaining Tony's trust. I struggled greatly with how I was supposed to satisfy the needs of the system while 'progressing Tony' and being of real assistance to a real person – this isolated, vulnerable man who needed help. I constantly asked myself the same question:

Where is the space to work with people like Tony to address the basic issues before we can even begin to look at realistic employment or training options?

- **Some Housekeeping: The Economic Downturn & Changes to Employment Policies in Ireland**

In order to understand the system in which I work, I need to explain the environment from both a historical and policy background. The impact of Ireland's Economic Downturn (2007 – 2008) following the collapse of the 'Celtic Tiger' is well documented. The country's unemployment rate increased from 4.6 per cent in 2006 to 15 per cent in 2012 (ESRI, 2015).

The increase in unemployment brought with it changes to the implementation and delivery of 'activation services' in Ireland as well as changes in the institutions responsible for delivery of activation services. 'Activation' is a major policy change which has affected social welfare systems all over Europe for the last number of years. Faced with growing unemployment, policy makers became concerned that the social welfare system was too 'passive' – i.e. just making payments – and that it should become more 'active' – encouraging/supporting/forcing welfare claimants to engage in training, education or work. In practice, activation can mean a lot of different things – from voluntary participation in career counselling, training or education, to 'workfare' i.e. compulsory work on a public scheme to maintain a social welfare entitlement. (EAPN, 2007)

While there is no agreed definition of the concept, the OECD (2013) defined 'activation strategies' as aiming:

> To bring more people into the effective labour force, to counteract the potentially negative effects of unemployment and related benefits on work incentives by enforcing their conditionality on active job search and participation in measures to improve employability, and to manage employment services and other labour market measures so that they effectively promote and assist the return to work. (p.132).

Ireland came into the recession period with an activation structure that was 'behind international best practice' and been criticised by the OECD and the

ESRI (JCEASP, 2018). As a consequence of the economic crisis during 2008-2012 where 329,000 jobs were lost, as well as pressure from the Troika, the government committed to the implementation of Activation and reform of the institutions responsible for its delivery (Whelan, 2017). In 2011 FÁS ('An Foras Áiseanna Saothair', known in English as The Training & Employment Agency and was a state agency which held responsibility for those seeking employment) was disbanded and organisations that had previously been responsible for welfare payments and Public Employment Services (PES) were amalgamated. The government launched their 'Pathways to Work Policy' (PTWP) in 2011 and as a result, a merger occurred between the then-Department of Social Protection (DSP) and FÁS employment services (JCEASP, 2018). The PTWP was implemented through a new public employment service called *Intreo*. The vocational training functions of FÁS moved to a new agency called SOLAS and to the new regional Education and Training Boards (ETB's).

During this period, significant changes occurred in the service delivered to jobseekers. The emphasis for the unemployed person moved away from passive to more active participation and the:

> Strengthening of conditionality whereby unemployed persons were required to engage in job search and activation programmes in order to continue receiving social welfare support. (Whelan, 2017, p.67).

Legislative changes introducing new penalties meant that jobseekers now had to comply with certain job seeking obligations or face a reduction in or disqualification of their jobseeker payment (Boland & Griffin, 2015).

Critics of the change would argue that without robust evaluation, the real impact of the PTWP cannot be evaluated:

> The absence of robust evaluation; the sanctions regime; the lack of person-centredness of the approach; the lack of quality guidance,

education & training; an absence of staff skills and up-skilling. (Whelan (2017, p 66).

O'Connell (2017) describes Ireland's relatively recent move to implement activation measures has been described as:

Uncertain, insufficiently resourced and often poorly thought out. (Whelan, 2017, p. 60).

- **More Housekeeping – Explaining The Local Employment Service (LES)**

I am a Guidance Counsellor or 'LES Mediator' with a Dublin based Local Employment Service (LES). Working under contract to the Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection (DEASP), and part of Ireland's Public Employment Service (PES), my job is to provide an information, advice and career guidance service to unemployed adults, to assist them to progress towards employment, training or education.

With 26 networks nationwide, the Local Employment Service (LES) was set up in the mid 1990's as a result of the Irish Government's Task Force on Long Term Unemployment (1995) which proposed the establishment of a service to meet the needs of the long-term unemployed in Ireland. This service was set up to create a more:

Client centred, more locally based employment service to be provided in conjunction with FÁS in disadvantaged areas. (NESF, 2004).

This coincided with the Government's National Employment Action Plan of 1996 whereby, unemployed jobseekers who required more intensive support were referred to the LES for support with their job-seeking (ERSI, 2011). When I commenced employment in the LES as a Mediator in 2007, the guidance work with clients was reflected within these policies. As well as assisting people who

were unemployed and furthest removed from the labour market with education, training and employment support and guidance, my role involved inter-agency supports and addressing social inclusion. For example, I would liaise with services specialising in intensive specialised support to the client – from addiction services, to mental health, disability, literacy and specialist services for those with convictions. The policies under which I trained as a guidance counsellor with Maynooth University were congruent to this way of working, with a core focus on guidance and counselling reflecting best practise in adult guidance and counselling within Ireland and nationally (Rafferty, 2000).

I completed my training as a Guidance Counsellor in Maynooth University in 2010. This training is highly relevant to the role of working with marginalised and vulnerable unemployed adults, concentrating as it does on the Rogerian person-centred approach to guidance and counselling, which I shall explain a little further on. Coming from this Rogerian person-centered perspective, as I have been trained, I struggled within this neoliberal system. I battled against how I was supposed to work with clients in a person-centred way under such rigid instructions which included time-limits for progressions, which do not take account of a person's whole situation; as well as penalty rating sanctions. How can a person who is homeless be expected to engage with a public employment service when their basic physiological needs are not being met? I am constantly reminded of Maslow's hierarchy of needs when I meet with a person homeless of at risk of homelessness. A person's most basic needs have to be met before they can be motivated to move to those higher up.

The majority of clients I meet with are 'directly referred' to our service through mandatory activation by DEASP, because they are in receipt of a Jobseekers Payment. Clients are required to attend and job-seek or engage in training or they risk gaining 'compliance indicators' (sanctions) to their payments. Following guidelines, if a client does not turn up to an appointment I am supposed to tick a box on the computer to alert the Department (DEASP).

The following text describes the process I must follow with people as outlined by the DEASP:

After selection to LES…activation clients are scheduled to attend a Group Information Session or a 1 to 1 appointment with an LES Mediator. An initial meeting is then followed by a 1 to 1 appointment within two weeks…during which a Personal Progression Plan (PPP) is drawn up, agreed and signed. Non-attendance… is followed up by Intreo and may include sanctioning (payment deduction) or a warning...Follow up appointments with the LES Mediator are focused on the progression of the PPP. Engagement continues for 12 months or until the client gains employment or self-employment of at least 30 hours a week. They are then considered case closed. (Lavelle, Callaghan, 2018, p.12).

- **The Rogerian Person-Centred Approach & Other Theoretical Approaches to Counselling**

The Rogerian person-centred counselling approach forms the philosophy under which I am trained and operate my practice as a guidance counsellor. In order to understand this approach, let me go back a bit in history and briefly explain how different counselling approaches began.

Although Gottifried Leibnitz was the first modern thinker to be credited with a clear formulation of the unconscious in the 1600's, it was Sigmund Freud who began the systematic investigation into its structure and function (Stevens, 1991). The history of counselling can be looked at in terms of the main theoretical approaches. By the late 1890's Sigmund Freud had developed psychoanalysis and the psychodynamic approach to counselling stems from this work. Ideas central to the psychodynamic theory include:

Those of unconscious motivation, psychosexual stages of development, innate sexual and aggressive drives, links between childhood and present behaviour, and the nature of defence mechanisms and their use. (Hough, 2006, p.33).

Other influential psychodynamic psychologists included Carl Jung, Otto Rank, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth.

From around the 1920's to the 1950's, Behaviourism grew to be the dominant school of thought in psychology, with notable behavioural psychologists such as Ivan Pavlov and B.F. Skinner. Perhaps the most famous, John B Watson, who earned the title the 'father' of behaviourism and is remembered for his infamous quote:

> Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors (1930, p.104).

The Behaviourist approach focused on the assumption that environment determines an individuals' behaviour, and that all behaviours are a result of experience; viewing human personality as a collection of learned behaviours. Both Behaviourism and the Psychodynamic approach are concerned with behaviour which can be observed.

The development of the person-centred approach (PCA) in the mid 20th century was developed by Carl Rogers, and began as a challenge of sorts to current ways of thinking. An American psychologist, and founder of the Humanistic approach to counselling, Rogers' ideas developed from his experience of both working as a counsellor / therapist and being a client in therapy and the views he developed about the Behaviourist and psychodynamic approaches to counselling. According to Casemore, (2011, 4) Rogers felt that the Behaviourists took the view that:

> Human beings are organisms that only react to stimuli, developing habits learned from experience; that individuals are helpless and are not responsible for their own behavior…individuals have been taught to think and behave in ways that are unhelpful or maladaptive and that it was the counsellor's job to teach them to be different.

While Psychoanalysts, particularly Freud:

Emphasised the dark side of human nature, with its destructive impulses, over which human beings seemed to have no control…and are solely the product of powerful biological drives. (2011, 4).

Rogers' disagreed with the main ideas of both the Behaviourist and Psychodynamic approaches, that human beings had no control over themselves, are inherently bad or weak and need an 'expert' counsellor or therapist to 'fix' them.

Central to Rogers' work was that people have inherent resources which enable them to deal with whatever life brings. His person-centred approach worked on the assumption that the client is best placed to understand and evaluate their own experience. Rogers argued that people are, essentially, positively motivated with a natural internal drive towards growth, health and adjustment. They can be trusted to make choices that enable them to shape, direct and take responsibility for their own existence and the way they live their lives. People need to be enabled to free themselves from internal and external controls imposed by others in order to become fully functioning and to 'heal' themselves. He felt that the natural tendency in any human being was to develop towards becoming a fully functioning individual, with a natural drive to become who we truly are, and put forward three conditions which he felt were essential for creating a healthy, productive and client-centred environment – those of unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence.

- **Brief History of Guidance Counselling**

Ali & Graham (1996, p. 8) define effective careers guidance as;

A process which aims to equip individuals with a clearer understanding of themselves and their potential for future career development.

Career Guidance Counselling has its beginnings in Parson's Career Guidance interview (1909). Rogers later developed Parsons work creating the seven-point-plan, a framework for the careers advisor to follow in order to gain information during the careers interview. This seven point plan had the 'advisor'

assess and 'prescribe' the necessary action required for the clients problem, and was very much in line with the trait and factor approach to guidance.

The 1960's brought about new holistic theories such as Donald Super and Carl Rogers where the emphasis shifted from the 'expert advisor' and more towards the 'client-centred' approach. Described as a 'basic philosophy' rather than simply a technique or method (Rogers, 1959) the goal of the person centred approach was for the advisor to be non-directive in the interview and to allow the client to think and feel, and in doing so, make their own decisions.

- **The Person-Centred Approach in Guidance Counselling**

In the 1960's, a more holistic and phenomenological theory of career guidance counselling began to emerge, with the ideas of Carl Rogers person-centred approach. The focus of this new approach was on facilitation; thus clients were encouraged to explore their own perceptions, which would bring them progressively nearer to the point where they could say for themselves what they wanted and how they were going to achieve it. (Law, 1984).

This person-centred approach lays emphasis on the adviser being non-directive in his/her interviewing technique. The goal of the interview is to establish what the client thinks and feels, and in so doing, empower them to make decisions for themselves. The central premise of Roger's philosophy is based on three core conditions, which focus on the quality of relationship between adviser and client. They are genuineness, where the adviser is open and real, rather than playing a role; unconditional positive regard where the adviser is non judgemental and accepting of the client; and empathic understanding, where the adviser senses accurately the feelings that the client is expressing and their underlying meaning. The Rogerian approach did not lay emphasis on a structured interview, the collection of information or assessment of the client by the adviser. The client was allowed time to come to his/her decision, without a recommendation from the adviser. The emphasis was upon reflection rather than action (Gothard et al, 2001).

In general, person-centred counsellors refrain from playing the role of

expert; they monitor how they were perceived by their clients; and are prepared to acknowledge their fallibility. These factors are essential for relating in-depth with clients and empowering them (Crisp, 2010). This way of working is in direct opposition to the systems I find myself currently struggling to work in.

- **March 2018 – 'Elena'**

I noticed from her date of birth on the screen that we are the same age. There are only days between our birthdays. But she looked so much older …her face was etched in pain. Our children were the same age too…this made me feel incredibly sad, for her and her children.

We sat across from each other in the interview room – a windowless sterile room. A room within a room. No natural light, no natural air, and a large computer glaring at me from my desk, with its blue and white screen shining. Sometimes when I'm in this room I think I can hear it whirring away 'processing people'.

I have done the best I can with this room to make it feel less like an interrogative space. I pushed the desk to the wall and sit knee to knee with the client to my left, the computer looms over to the right of my desk. My knee is touching the panic button under my desk. Sometimes I wonder should the panic button be there for the clients and not the staff, for it is them who need to press it more than us.

She is sobbing quietly, and whispers something to herself in a language that I don't understand.

It wasn't always like this when she first moved to Ireland, she sobbed. It was good once. They had jobs and rented a nice house – they even had a garden. Their children went to school on the same street where they lived. Imagine that! Her mother would come and stay so she could work. She was a cleaner. It was hard work but she loved it. He worked in construction – great hands – he could build anything with his hands. He promised her that one day he would build them their very own Irish house. They bought a car and would spend weekends discovering Ireland. They had seen every part of Ireland.

Then out of the blue her husband got laid off. The builder closed down and didn't pay him. He got another job, but it happened again. Their savings started to dwindle. They started to become aware of their difference – only the Irish were getting jobs, no jobs for the Eastern Europeans. He took a job delivering pizzas in the evenings and was in a car crash. The other car drove off. He spent months in hospital and when he came out, all their savings were gone and they couldn't pay their rent. They had to leave. His brother took them in to live in his rented house along with his own family, and the five of them sleep in one room. But the landlord found out and was angry and told them all they have to leave. His brother's wife is furious with them because of this, as they are now losing their home too.

Please, I don't know what to do…please can you help me?

I look at the letter in front of her, her 'summons' to attend our service. It reads:

NOTIFICATION TO ATTEND INDIVIDUAL ACTIVATION METING...This plan will set out steps you can take, with our support, to advance your progress to work…any refusal or failure…to take up such offers will result in your jobseeker payment being reduced…

I try not to think of the stress this letter must have had on her.

*I look at the computer screen – the blue and white screen continues to glow on my desk, burning into me. My job is to follow instructions as laid out in the contracted employment service manual. I am required to open that screen and ask her a number of work related questions and tick the boxes. I am then required to draw up a Personal Progression Plan (PPP) and in the language of the system to, '**focus on progression of the agreed plan'.** We will then meet every month for the duration of 12 months where she will either progress into work or training or be*

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considered case closed and referred back to social welfare, for an interview on why she has not progressed into employment.

I want to scream.

I feel utterly helpless for her…what can I do? Think of boundaries…fuck boundaries! This is one human to another…

I don't have the power to stop her coming here. The system is in motion and changing it is beyond my control. She has been told to attend this service. She receives a job-seeking payment and therefore is obliged to attend and be available for work or training. For the millionth time I wish the computer had a button which offered a 'deferral due to homelessness'. I mentally go through the list of barriers available on the screen that I might be able to apply in relation to her:

Access to childcare
Access to Transport
Caring responsibilities
Court conviction
English language proficiency
Health
Literacy / Numeracy

There is no option for homelessness.

Homelessness does not exist here! I want to scream again in utter frustration. Give this family a break!
Boundaries again…

Professional hat back on…what can I do here? I can't solve her housing situation.
But I can let her use our phone.

She needs to ring to get a hotel room for the night and is low on credit. I offer her the phone and ask her does she want a cup of tea. She has not had a hot drink all day and starts to cry again. She would love a cup of tea.

I'm almost back at the interview room with the tea and some biscuits when I hear a colleague say;

Where are you going? You can't bring tea in there! Have you a client in there? We are not supposed to give clients tea!

Why not?

It's against health & safety rules.

We sit in silence and she drinks her tea. I allow her space to gather her thoughts. I call it a 'holding space' and I'm using this space more and more, day after day.   To my right I can feel the computer screen burn into me…it's watching me…I'm supposed to be completing a PPP. My sadness turns to anger and I feel like sticking two fingers at the bloody computer.

I reach over and turn off the screen.

- **The System Is To Blame: Neoliberalism**

After meeting with Elena, my anger with the system implodes. I write in my journal:

> *I'm just a tiny part of a bigger picture – a large machine. Down here on the frontline, where I am working one-to-one with the person who needs help, we are just the little people. And down here with the little people, right now does not feel good. (Judge-Preston, 2017).*

We are living in a time of neoliberalism, where economies worldwide are being deregulated, and governments are shrinking themselves via austerity or privatisation (Metcalf, 2017). But what exactly is neoliberalism?
Neoliberalism policies emphasise the value of free market competition. This means:

> De-regulating the financial sector and opening up economies to foreign investment and capital flows; reducing the role and size of the state by privatisation, public spending cuts and limited borrowing….Seeing workers as barrier to profit and enterprise, neoliberalism aims to reduce worker protections. Neoliberalism also includes the commodification of natural and public resources like water, housing, education, health care, that is, opening up private companies to convert everything into a commercial product that can be bought and sold for profit.
> (Hearne, 2016)

Neoliberalism believes in the freedom of the individual, however, the individual remains responsible for their own welfare. Neoliberalism balks at the idea of the state spending money on the poor – it is an individuals' own responsibility to earn enough money to support themselves and their family (McCoy, Pebble, 2012). Fitzsimons (2017) states how a key factor in understanding why the neoliberal project is maintained lies in the common internalization of a 'neoliberal logic':

> Ensuring enough public compliance to allow certain policies to be advanced even when they are detrimental to most peoples' interests. (P.10)

I start to read about neoliberalism in the governance of activation policies. As the changes in employment policy started to happen over the last number of years, our systems at work began to change. A noticeable shift started as we were slowly moved away from the old way of working where value was placed on the person and the person-centred approach. As the neoliberal agenda grew, our working conditions started to change and the rules as to how the client interacted with our service followed. Our job titles changed and overnight we became known in correspondence as 'Case Officers'. No longer could a client work with us indefinitely until they progressed to employment, an approach that had worked well with extremely marginalised people with multiple barriers previously. Very often in this work. the primary goal was in relation to identifying issues in the clients lives which needed to be addressed, before they could even consider work. When working with very marginalised people, many factors need to be considered. The 12-month deadline on how long we could work with clients is an abhorrently short timescale for many clients who were stuck in a cycle of poverty and where simply 'getting a job' was not going to make their situation better. I refer to my client Tony's story from earlier. Often this only comes with time and trust. In this work we are not often dealing with people who can present and eloquently outline their personal issues at the first appointment. In many cases, especially for those in private rented accommodation who receive the state Rental Supplement, any change in income like a job could mean losing this payment, and then being priced out of the private rental market. A vicious circle.

In 2015 the government introduced private 'for-profit' players to deliver employment activation services to unemployed people. Neoliberalism can quite clearly be seen in the fallout of this government decision where the unemployed person became a commodity. Job adverts for staff within these companies called for the skillset of sales experience and focused on reaching

targets – far from the world of person-centred guidance and counselling.

Linking in with how neoliberalism is affecting my work directly, it's important to mention what is happening in my industry currently. These are unsettling times for NGO (Non Governmental Organisation) not-for-profit contractors delivering the Public Employment Services in Ireland, as a radical overhaul is expected to be announced in late 2019 / early 2020. Privately among colleagues this is being referred to as 'the death of the LES' as messages start to seep through that government may not interested in the societal values and community needs serviced by a person-centered model of career guidance employment service.

In my journal I write:

> *Could it be the neoliberalist environment, which has me disconcerted? We are living through a great period of uncertainty. At work this uncertainty is magnified as we await details on tenders and contracts and the future of our own professions. It's unsettling times. Nothing is secure and we don't know what's happening next. In some ways, we are at risk ourselves of homelessness as the future of our service hangs in the balance. We can but for now just imagine what the new public employment services vision for employment services in Ireland will look like; what this government tender will request of our service; and how we as career guidance professionals will feature in if at all. (Judge-Preston, 2017).*

- **Returning To Learning**

I continued to feel that there was more to this getting under my skin, but I could not name it. I decided to apply for a Masters in Guidance & Counselling with Maynooth University. Completing my Postgraduate studies there in 2010, nine years previously, I had been meaning to return to learning for many years but the time had never been right. I write:

Maybe I'm mad to do this. Or maybe I'll learn some coping tricks, some new academic stuff; meet other professionals in the same work and try and see does this help me love my job again.

I'm open to giving this one last shot. The learning experience should help me to work through my next step. (Judge-Preston, 2017).

- **June 2018 – Application for the M.Ed. Guidance & Counselling at Maynooth University**

In my personal statement application, I wrote about the idea I had for research:

…An (other) idea … is based around 'holding spaces' with clients. Our funders (aka 'The System') do not see the value in 'holding spaces' with clients as (space for Counselling & Guidance) is not viewed as a tangible measure of progression (like a job or a course). Yet the guidance and counselling work done in this space can be hugely beneficial to clients, particularly those in crisis battling multiple issues…(Judge-Preston, 2018).

The application required a personal statement. In it I tell part of my story:

I completed the Higher Diploma Postgraduate Adult Guidance & Counselling training with Maynooth University in 2010. I published my research in 2011 … and this period of my life was very much a career 'high'. This time coincided with the fallout from the recession whereby my client group was hugely diverse – from those long-term unemployed with major barriers, to highly skilled professionals who had never been out of work. There was huge learning in all of this.

But following this 'high' came a very difficult period in my life, which brought with it a feeling of disconnection. I found myself lost and battling

my identities – a mother of two children; a worker in a tough system that was changing daily; a daughter nursing a parent through a terminal illness and learning about the tough realities of grief; a family of origin changing and learning the new normal, following the loss of my father. I was also a wife, a sister, a daughter, a colleague, a friend … I feel exhausted, like I have been climbing the wrong mountain.

I see this course as…giving me the space and confidence to look again at myself, and where I want to go, both personally and professionally in a more authentic way… I feel a great connection to the learning it offers and the opportunity for me to be true to myself, both professionally and personally, and in turn of course, to my clients. (Judge-Preston, 2018).

> *This above all: to thine own self be true*
> *And it must follow, as the night the day,*
> *Thou canst not then be false to any man…*
> *(Shakespeare, Hamlet Act 1, scene 3, 78–82)*

- **September 2018**

In 2018 I enrolled in a place on the M.Ed. Guidance & Counselling programme with the Department of Adult & Community Education at Maynooth University.

I write in my Journal, (Judge-Preston, 2017),

> *What have I done?*

PART 2

THE BAGGAGE THAT I CARRY

- **September 2018: The Story of my Name**

On the first morning of the class, we were asked to introduce ourselves to each other by explaining the story of our first name. While I knew the story of my name, it dawned on me that I had never actually told anyone. I explained to the students sitting beside me how I was my mothers' fourth pregnancy. She had already lost two children at birth, and my older sister had been diagnosed with a long-term illness. A parish pilgrimage to Lourdes when six months pregnant with me in 1975, resulted in a promise made to the Blessed Virgin Mary at the grotto of the Lourdes shrine that if this child turned out to be well and healthy, she would give her the first name of Marie as a variant of Mary, and my middle name would be in honour of St Bernadette. As I told this story, I remember thinking about how I had never before considered my biography through the meaning of my name. While telling the story I joked that while I thankfully turned out to be a very healthy child, I grew up to be a bit of a disappointment from a faith perspective as I became a staunch atheist, even going so far as moving to 'the north' and marrying 'a protestant'.

Later, I wrote in my personal journal:

> *What emerges from this story? Loss, belonging, difference, disappointment, rebellion, love…*
>
> *Why do I joke when introducing my husband and I like this? Labelling us as the protestant and the catholic? Ours was not a story of 'love across the barricades'. Our families had no issues with our 'cross cultural union'. But when I really reflect on this, I remember a few little things that have happened here and there… Like that time at my grandmother's funeral seventeen years ago, when an elderly male relative refused to accept my husband's hand stretched out to offer his condolences 'because he was a protestant'. My husband had never met this man before that moment.*

Or that time when I brought my husband home to meet my family and a visiting neighbour started to raise his voice and blame the problems of Ireland on the Northern Irish protestants.

Or how easily I accepted that I had never met my husbands' grandfather who was alive for the first eight years we were together because 'It would have been too difficult for him to accept a Free-Stater. He just never liked them!'

Religion doesn't matter to us – sure we don't practice the faiths given to us by our families. We identify as atheist. At times it has really mattered to others though and I surprise myself that I forget that. We settled in Dublin to be closer to a better choice of multi-denominational schools and to ensure our children are brought up with no religion, free to explore them all and choose their own or none as adults. (Judge-Preston, 2017).

- **October 2018: First Group Supervision:**

The programme involved one-to-one supervision as well as a monthly supervision with three Adult Educators. Our intimate group consisted of six students. We nervously introduced ourselves again and spoke about our research ideas. In introducing myself this time I focused more on the academic and employment part of my story.

In my journal notes later that night I write:

So we had our first group supervision today and had to introduce ourselves again and give our research ideas. I told my 'story' using place names and discuss religion again. I was born in Leinster, started school in rural Munster, finished school in Leinster, then spent some time in Dublin before heading to university in Belfast. A summer in the USA. Post graduation a year in London. Many happy years back in Belfast where we bought a house and settled down, when my husband was

headhunted to take up a job in Dublin. I told how my husband and I are from the same island but from different cultures and religious backgrounds, and bringing up our own family as non-religious.

I declared I was unsure about my research – I was considering researching the difficulties of working in a 'bureaucratic machine' and the challenges this presented in doing a person centred job. The difficulties of working with people in an inflexible system, where their basic physiological needs were not being met. The sheer ridiculousness of having to deal with people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness – sure how the hell were they meant to be able to look for a job when they hadn't even got a home? I wondered about asking other guidance counsellors what is it like to be in this world. Do they struggle with it too? I had not yet fully pinned down what my research would be, but I did know it would not be autoethnography.

*There was a pause before another student asked 'how does that work?… How can you be so sure about what methodology you **won't** use, when you are not even sure what your research will be?'*

Oh I've done that methodology before, I replied. I did a piece of work for my Postgrad using autoethnography. It got published actually… so I'm looking to learn something else now.

I saw the looks exchanged and moved on. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned having had work published. Was that a bit conceited of me? (Judge-Preston, 2017).

- **September 2018: First One-to-One Supervision**

In my first one-to-one with my Supervisor I burst into tears talking about the last piece of work I did 9 years ago. I wrote it, it was published, and I put it away. I had not opened it until this year. Reading my own story back from almost a

decade ago was painful. I don't know where the emotion came from. So much had happened since. I had introduced it to colleagues recently at our monthly peer support group and the reaction was so positive. Finding it quoted in other peoples work was strange. I didn't know where to start with my feelings on it. I never celebrated this work. It was done and I put it away in a box not to be opened until my decision to return to learning.   Life just got in the way. I started this programme thinking if I can come up with a research question that is a little more 'practical' than feeling, I might get through it easier. Is there any way I could take a theory of career guidance and a group of clients at work and create some sort of practical workshop? I write:

> *Autoethnography took a lot out of me. I know I'm pushing it back, and this niggles at me because if I'm to be authentic I need to go with it. I'm just not sure I'm able to go there right now… (Judge-Preston, 2017).*

- **November 2018 - The Dreaded Second Album**

It's now a couple of months into the M.Ed. and we are having our regular weekly group check-in, on where we are at with our research.

Everyone is nervous.   I bravely mention that I'm really worried about my research. The last time I was in formal learning was 9 years ago, and
as the work I did got published, it puts me under pressure.
Straight away the adult educator retorts:

> Aha! The dreaded second album! That old rock ' n roll cliché, that the dreaded second album will never be as good as the first. Let's talk about this!

But I can't…all I know is that I've brought it up again and yet I can't go there.

Later that night I write:

It came out again today, that bloody autoethnograpy I did ten years ago. Why does it linger over me? Privately, I believe it might have been fluke… the fraud within me alive and well. At one point, I even considered it may have been the pregnancy hormones.

I wrote once about my experiences at a certain time and it was very well received. But it was a very difficult and emotional process. Do I really want to open that box again? I'm not sure I'm able, or even know where to begin. (Judge-Preston, 2017).

- **December 2018: The pressure's On**

I'm really starting to feel the pressure of this programme. It just feels like everyone is so ahead on their research and they all know what they are doing except me. Every week our sessions begin with a check-in of where everyone is at and mine feels like it is going no-where. I had come up with a few ideas on people to interview – I will ethically recruit some guidance counsellors working in other services like mine, people I don't know. I've identified a service and the manager is keen to put me in touch with a couple of the staff. But something is stopping me send the email. It just doesn't feel right. I considered asking colleagues, but I worry that I already know some of my colleagues thoughts on all of this. I could do it like a conversation either I guess, with colleagues? Why is this so difficult? (Judge-Preston, 2017).

I read over what I've written for my research proposal so far:

I'm currently experiencing a problem within my practice as I feel like I'm trying to balance the game between the clients' needs and the systems' needs. My caseload is filling up with people who are unemployed and homeless, or unemployed and at real risk of homelessness. How can people be expected to engage with a public employment service when their basic physiological needs are not being met?

In my training, I learned policies & practices that were fairly congruent with my own values and those of my organisation, but I feel this congruence has now broken down. This experience within my practice has triggered a need to examine myself within my practice at a closer level. I want to research and learn with others how they manage these contradictions. I am curious to know if others in this work experience similar contradictions to me, and if they do, how does it feel for them? How do they cope with these contradictions? How do they do their job within the rigid system when a person sits in front of them who has been made homeless? How does that affect them? Do they have supports? The research data will be collected by way of semi-structured interview(s). I have not yet decided to interview 1, 2 or 3 participants…

A few days later I attend an industry conference and listened to a person from within my industry speak. Her confidence and her ability to 'not get caught up in the shit' stayed with me. As part of my research idea was to interview other guidance counsellors in the business, and ask them how they felt about what was happening, I considered if I could interview her? At the back of my mind I was worried that she didn't have the appearance of someone who was struggling with the system as I was. She seemed the opposite in fact - confident and in control.

- **January 2019: I'm Ready to Interview**

After meeting my Supervisor, I leave his office with the intention of setting up the interviews I was planning as part of my research. I was going to do this! I would interview 2 or 3 others involved in similar work to me to ask them do they feel any incongruence in their work? One of those identified was the lady from the conference. I decided I would take the plunge and just meet with her and see what I could learn. I spent hours writing and rewriting an email of introduction. Then, as I was mulling over how it read and when to send it, some personal issues arose. These two events, which I later reflected back upon as

disorienting dilemmas, form a central part of my own transformative learning. The initiation of a transformative learning experience usually denoting a life crisis that triggers a questioning of assumptions, resulting in transformed beliefs (Taylor, 2000). According to Mezirow (1991), disorienting dilemmas are an integral part of transformative learning.

My First Disorienting Dilemma: Meeting 'the Man with the Bag'

He landed into the session over half an hour late, carrying a large red holdall bag. He was a tall African man. His physical presence took over the room. I noticed the beads of sweat on his head. The crumpled up page in his hand with phone numbers scribbled all over it. He dropped the bag on the floor and it sat between us. The zip on his bag was broken and clothes were spilling out. I could see a child's teddy-bear, it's leg dangling out.

He is in such a hurry that his words spilled out like his clothes. They had to leave their house that morning, his wife and children were in the car crying, its all such a mess; never in his life did he think they would be evicted, he has been trying, he really has been trying, but he just can't find a place to live. He has been ringing places to stay but everyone says no and he is now sure its because he is African and its his accent. Please, he asks, can you ring some places for me because they will listen to you being white and Irish. Can you find us somewhere to stay? Just for one night, please? Can you help me?

Afterwards, I can't get the image of this man and his bag and his family out of my head. I also realise I never asked him his name. In all my years in my job I have never once forgotten to ask someone their name.

I followed up with him later that day by phone to pass on details about a service, which offers a space for families to complete homework and wash clothes and cook a meal. He told me the family had been offered a hotel room for the night 70 kilometres away. He barely has enough

money to put petrol into the car to drive there, and he can't afford to travel to and from Dublin to take the children to school…there are no cooking facilities…where can he go for help? The baby needs nappies. What are they going to do…his wife is still crying and he has sent his two older children to go stay with friends as he can barely cope with the younger three. I can hear a woman and children crying in the background.

All week I have difficulty getting this man from my head. I call him the Man with the Bag. Not out of disrespect, but because I cannot separate the image of his bag from him. I woke at night thinking of him and his family, wondering where they were. I know this is not healthy in terms of my practice, but I just can't shake him.

Disorienting Dilemma Number 2: House For Sale

That same week my mother told my siblings and I that she was selling the family home. Downsizing. The house is far too big for her, too expensive to run and manage. It was purpose built as a family home and a Guest House in 1992, twenty-seven years ago. My Father and Mother had designed this home and my Dad had built it. Since my Dad passed away 5 years ago, she has managed the upkeep on her own, but now she has decided it is time to let it go. This is a huge decision for her and one that I fully support.

While I genuinely supported her decision, I just wasn't sure how I really felt. She was right to do this while she was still able. She had worked hard all her life, was in her seventies and it was time she relaxed and enjoyed herself with the fruits of her labour. But this house has been my family home for twenty-seven years. I wasn't laughing, and I wasn't crying.

What did my silence really mean?

Something stirred up within me. I had not lived here since 1996 – over 25 years ago. I start to reflect deeply about that time 27 years ago, when we first moved there, and some painful memories surface. From the first night I slept in it in 1992, my sole aim was to get away from it and that's what I tried to do.

Trusting the process of autoethnography, I enquire into these disorienting dilemmas through writing. My writing is helping me to make sense of my own story.

Going Back To Go Forward

- **June 1992: Munster**

The year I turned 16, two life-altering events occurred.

My cousin was killed in an accident at just 20 years old.
And my father was diagnosed with a serious illness, which resulted in him having to leave his job. Having moved the family from a small rural village in the Midlands of Ireland to rural Munster in the early 1980's when I was just six years old in pursuit of said job, and having established strong roots there, this was difficult news.

My cousin had been killed at work in an industrial accident in the family business. The family naturally fell apart. Their business still had to go on. It had contracts to service and a family unable to cope. It was decided my Dad would go and work for them to keep the business afloat. This would solve two dilemmas so to speak. It meant Dad had a job away from the industrial chemicals, which were smothering his lungs. And it would help his brother and family to keep their business going while they grieved.

After ten years in rural Munster, my family would return to Leinster.
In the summer of 1992, aged 16, and having lived in Munster for most of my life, we returned 'home' to live in a town in Leinster.
Except it wasn't my home.
I still remember my parents shouting at me to hurry up and get into the car, the removal truck pulling away as I stood holding my best friends B's hand.

Kiss the four walls and you will return.

Really?

Yeah, I saw it in a film.

How does that work?

If you believe strongly enough it will happen.

OK, I believe.

I'm going to miss you so much.

I'll write every day.

I'm going now because I don't want to see you leave…I still can't believe this is happening to us. You are my best friend forever.

B turned and jumped on her bike and cycled off, tears streaming down her face.

GET IN THE CAR!

I quickly ran around the house and kissed the 4 walls.

I could hear their exasperated voices;

What is she doing? Is she kissing the house?

Enough of this messing – get in the car now!

I climbed into the car, refusing to look away from our home.

Why are you kissing the house?

It means I'll come back.

Never go back love, always go forward! The ever-practical voice of my mother piped up.

We're going home girls, my Dad practically sang to my mum and sisters.

It's not my home.

And so began my complicated relationship with home & belonging.

- **November 1992: Leinster**

Six months after the move I was struggling to settle into my new school and make new friends. I was utterly miserable. Promises made to be able to see old friends at weekends never materialised. It had been a particularly tough week at school. I was struggling to make friends and fit in. It seemed like no-one wanted to speak to me. Everyone had their friends and were not interested in making new ones. A new teacher had asked me to read an Irish book aloud in class and a few sentences in she stopped me. It seemed there was a dialect issue – my Munster Gaeilge pronounced words different to the Leinster Gaeilge.

Cailín, Cá bhfuil tú? (Girl, where are you from?)

I hesitated in my answer as it dawned on me, I'm not sure…do I say Leinster or Munster?

A quick-witted student noticed my uncertainty –
Níl a fhios ag an cailín cá bhfuil sí ón múinteoir! (The girl doesn't know where she is from, teacher)

The class burst into laughter as I started to die of embarrassment.

Suí síos agus a bheith ciúin! (Sit down and be quiet!)

Tá a fhios ag gach duine cá bhfuil said. Cá bhfuil an baile? (Everyone knows where they are from – where is home?)

Another pause, as I hesitated on which county to declare.

Bhí an baile ina Mumhan agus anois is í Laighean. (I used to live in Munster but now home is Leinster).

You are not in Munster anymore girl, so stop with that Gaeilge na Mumhan dialect, Here in Leinster we speak our own dialect of Lárchanúint.   Listen and learn.

Everyone laughed again.

I wanted to sink into the floor and never come out. I hated this place.

Two days later I ran away and returned to Munster to our old home. B was right – I would go back! I couldn't wait to tell her!

It was a well-planned journey waiting for the right time to happen, and that time was now. Getting laughed at and reprimanded for speaking Irish in the wrong dialect was the final straw and now I was off. I didn't belong with those people, so I was going back to my own. I took a bus at night dressed warmly wearing a large hat and scarf. I got off the bus three miles before my destination and walked in the dark. Whenever a car light approached I would climb into the ditch and lie down. I was going home and no one would stop me.

Before we moved I had hidden a back door key in the garage. It was still there. I had kept a close ear on developments and had heard my parents discuss how the new owners would not be moving in until after Christmas. I let myself in the back door and walked around, careful to

not turn a light on. I still remember how fast and hard my heart was thumping. I was home at last. But the happiness I expected to feel turned to dread. It smelled different, and its emptiness shocked me. I forgot all the furniture was gone. I didn't realise how cold it would be. I sat on the cold kitchen floor and cried. The stark realisation finally started to set in – this house was no longer my home. And I didn't belong here.

- **October 1996: Ulster**

I'm sitting at a table in a restaurant in Belfast being interviewed by a Chef for a waitress position. It's a very fancy place and feels quite intimidating. I've heard this chef can be a difficult man and I'm nervous but I muster up all my confidence, as I really want this job. I grew up in hospitality. I could do this!

Where are you from?

Leinster

I've got friends in Leinster You don't sound very Leinster.

Well, I grew up in Munster. And my mother was fanatical about speech & drama lessons, so I suppose I have a very non-descript accent.

Indeed…and no one wants a Munster accent, do they? So what brought you to Belfast?

College. I'm studying at Queen's.

Have they no colleges down South?

Of course they do. But I wanted to come here.

Family here?

No. No connections to Belfast at all.

I sense a story?

OK. I didn't get the points in the Leaving Cert for what I wanted to do. I moved house at sixteen and changed schools. I found the move tough and I struggled with my Leaving Cert. But I did a two-year BTEC in a PLC.   It's a UK qualification, which meant I could apply to universities through UCAS. So Belfast it was. And here I am.

Yes here you are, a psychology student looking for a job in hospitality. So let me see… hospitality background, good…your CV says you've worked in restaurants in Kerry over the last few summers? What's the Kerry connection?

Yes, my best friend lived there.

She at Queen's now too?

No, she, em…she passed away actually.

Really? Same age as you? Shit, sorry…Cancer?

Sorry?

Your friend have cancer did she?

Em…no actually, she died from sudden adult death syndrome.

Silence.

Sorry to hear that. I lost someone to that too. It's very difficult to comprehend…Right then Annmarie of Leinster, Munster and now Ulster - I'm going to call you our Mexican.

I don't understand..?

He starts laughing again -
From South of the border, get it? You're a Mexican!

Oh right…

You seem like you could hold a plate and communicate well - Can you come in on Sunday night for a trial?

Absolutely! Thank you.

- **December 2003: For God & Ulster**

Thank-you for coming back to meet with me. We were really impressed with your interview, and would like to offer you the job of Information Officer with our Employment Project.

Thank you so much!

There are just a few things we would like to talk to you about…

OK

Look, there is no easy way to say this but I feel I should give you some background to this place, off the record, before you accept. You are not from here and I need to be sure you understand the kind of place this is.

OK…

This area has problems. It's a disadvantaged working class protestant area of East Belfast. You're not in South Belfast over here. The University area and where you have lived in Belfast – it is nothing like here. This is a different world. A lot of service users are former Loyalist paramilitaries. It's not usual to have someone with a southern accent working here. See over there – that's the peace wall, and beyond that - that's the catholic side. You being from down south, whether you are one or not, automatically qualifies you as a catholic. That's just the way it goes around here. Some service users might not like that. They may ask to not work with you. You might well be accused of not belonging here, not being one of us. Many will ask you where you are from. There will be an assumption that you are a Christian, coming here in a type of mission to help us as that's the only way people from the outside come here. It can be a dark and miserable place. I need to know that you understand this before you come on board. I can guarantee you that you will be safe working here but you will create a curiosity. People will want to find out about you and they will. Where you live. Who you live with. They will find this out and if you are ok with all of that then the job is yours. But I want you to think about this and talk to your family before you say yes. I welcome you to come and work here but you just need to keep an awareness at all times that you are not from here, and will never be from here in the eyes of the service users. This area is not and will never be your home and you will always be treated as an outsider.

The next day I accept the job and so began three of the happiest years of my working life.

- **January 2007: Living the Ulster Dream.**

Should we stay or should we go?

I don't know…

My husband and I are standing in the tiny kitchen of our terraced home in East Belfast.

Do you want to go?

No, not really. In fact I have no desire whatsoever to live in Dublin. I have never wanted to live in Dublin. I'm happy here. This is the closest place to home I've felt since I was 15. I love our little home. I love our life…but maybe we need to be looking at the next step, career wise, as there are far more career opportunities in Dublin.

And we can always come back

Absolutely! We can always come back. We can rent our home and we always have that to return to.

- **March 2007**

Life in Dublin begins. I start working as a Mediator with a Dublin based LES. My husband takes up the position he was headhunted for.

- **June 2008**

My husband's job doesn't work out. Targets keep shifting. Promises broken. He leaves and along with two other colleagues they set up their own business. The recession has started. It's risky times.

- **September 2008**

I commenced the 2 year postgrad Higher Diploma in Adult Guidance & Counselling in Maynooth University.

- **June 2009**

  Our first son was born halfway through the Postgrad. The pregnancy was unplanned.

- **June 2010**

  I submitted my final dissertation and graduate as a guidance counsellor from Maynooth University.

  We sold our home in Belfast and bought one in Dublin. We are parents now – this is the right thing to do. We sat one night at the kitchen table with a map of Greater Dublin and on it we marked where we worked and all the Educate Together Multi-denominational schools. We applied to all the schools and based our house-hunt around the subsequent school offers.

- **June 2011**

  My work was published in Aontas: The Irish Journal of Adult & Community Education. I wrote about becoming a mother while training to be a guidance counsellor.

- **2010 – 2018**

  My father became terminally ill.

  The business is growing.

  The recession is in full swing and there is no space for personal development at work. Head down and get on with it.

We still drive past our old home in Belfast and wonder about what it might be like to still live there. It would never work with a family…too small, no garden, too many stairs, that dodgy boiler…Still, what would it be like to have brought our family up here?

Our second son was born.

My father died.

Beginnings and endings.

We bought a mobile home in Northern Ireland, in a seaside village close to our old home.

Life starts to feel more difficult by the day. I'm struggling with work and finding the homeless clients presenting very tough to deal with. I feel like I'm climbing a mountain and getting no-where.

I apply to return to learning.

- **September 2018**

I'm back in education, in Maynooth University, studying the M.Ed. in Guidance & Counselling.

PART 3

UNPACKING & REORGANISING

April 2019: Our own bag full of things.

My husband and I have two children, aged 6 and 9 years old.

My husband runs a successful business.

I work part-time around school hours.

We are doing well.

We own our own home, in nice area.

Our children go to a multi-denominational school.

We are comfortable.

Healthy.

We even have a mobile, 'a holiday house' as our children call it, in Northern Ireland close to my husband's family.

But we are unsettled, and have always been since we moved to Dublin twelve years ago.

We are not sure whether we should stay living in Dublin or return to Belfast.

Career-wise Dublin offers more opportunities.

We can make money here.

But how important is money?

Belfast offers less financial gain but a different pace of life.

It also has the bonus of having our 'own people'.

We have so many close friends there.

Compared to Dublin where all our acquaintances are work or business related.

Often, we feel isolated and lonely here.

But we are parents now and we have children so this decision needs to be more about them than us.

Brexit, sectarianism, living in conformist Northern Ireland – would this be good for our children growing up?

Which would be the better choice?

We don't want them to ever have to pause and wonder are they protestant or catholic, or do they belong there?

There is a freedom of sorts from this in Dublin – isn't there?

Do we stay or do we go?

We quote Alex Andreou, (2019):

> *Years ago Dad told me: we all know where we're from, but where you belong, you find that out the first time you leave a place for a while and when you're on the final bit of transport coming back, and your soul is like a battery reaching for its charger.*

So, What's The Story? What Is This All About?

This research is written in three parts. Part 1, which I've named *'Pack your bags and get the hell out of here!'* describes the background to my research. It starts at a specific point in time in December 2017, detailing a problem I had at work where I was angry and fighting a battle. I felt deeply frustrated in the system within which I worked, and I blamed the system entirely. My struggle initially focused on my deep incongruence at working within a neoliberal paradigm while trained under a person-centred philosophy. How was I supposed to work with people who were presenting to our service under fear of losing their jobseekers payment, while they were homeless? How could I assist them to get a job or training when they did not know where they would be sleeping that night? From my place within the service, where I was sitting face-to -face with these people, the system was not helping them at all. From where I sat, it seemed to be causing them even more cruel and unnecessary stress. I was angry, and fighting a battle.

This led me to consider as my research, to seek out and speak with others working in my industry, doing this same job as me. Did they feel the same as me? Working out the process of whom I could speak with and what questions I would ask, led me to consider the ethics involved. Until I could work out my own incongruence, it was unethical to ask others about theirs. Returning to education and having the supportive structure of group and one-to-one supervision, helped me to reflect upon and write into my problem.

In Part 2, entitled '*The Baggage that I Carry'* I lowered myself into autoethnography where the process of writing allowed me to shift my gaze from the external to the internal. I recognised that I was the subject of the research, not the system or others. I took solace here, in this cathartic place, writing parts of my life that I had not before put into words. I used writing as a method of inquiry into that complexity of subjectivity that this enquiry brought me into. Writing into my disorienting dilemmas, I tried to make sense of the mess.

This brought me into Part 3, where in *'Unpacking and Reorganising',* I reflect upon what I have learned while journeying through this living inquiry. I am metaphorically, 'unpacking and reorganising' my own baggage.

Using the methodology of autoethnography as a reflexive vehicle led me to write into myself. It allowed me to write my own story, as well as the stories of the people presenting to practice. It provided me with the space to work out my own incongruence, and work through the disorienting dilemmas which had emerged in my professional and personal life. Autoethnography helped me to document and learn from this living journey of self, by looking deep within myself. It put me in touch with my own inner world, in order to gain a clearer picture of the deeper issues which arose for me. And how these issues are part of a wider context within the neoliberal paradigm. How can I resource myself to be hopeful with this challenging client group, within the absurd neoliberal paradigm within which I work?

What Knowledge Has Emerged in this Living Journey of Self?

I can honestly say that some major pieces of learning have emerged for me during this process. I have gained a deeper professional self-understanding and insight into what is going on in my own internal world, and how it can affect my practice. The process of writing, of using autoethnography as a reflexive vehicle allowed me to shift my gaze from the external to the internal. I recognized that I was the subject and the object of the research – not 'the system' or others.

- **Shifting My Gaze From The External To The Internal**

I needed to understand what this difficulty was that I had at work, in order to move forwards. I used autoethnography as described by Ellis (2013) as:

A way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally and reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but consider how and why we think, act and feel as we do. (p. 10).

By writing into the unknown, I learned that I was triggered by more than just a normal human sadness for those people I was meeting at work, whose lives were turned upside down by homelessness.

- **Going Right In**

Working with people who are troubled or traumatised can result in negative consequences, many of which are unconscious. Monitoring one's own emotional responses is essential to counselling work. I started to understand that what was going on in my own internal world might be affecting my professional practice. My own story was in some way getting mixed up with the clients. No longer a novice trainee, but an experienced practitioner with a wealth of experience, I felt a certain shame around this. It was painful and difficult to admit to. Initially I put the blame firmly externally, pointing my finger at the system. I battled with myself until it became too much, until I finally realised that because I had metaphorically taken the Man with the Bag home with me meant that I had some work to do on myself.

But I was still so reluctant to go there. I had started to read *Revisions* by Carolyn Ellis, and thought about her words:

Often you confront things about yourself that are less than flattering. Believe me, honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubts and emotional pain. Just when you think you can't stand the pain any more – that's when the real work begins. Then there's the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you have written or having any control over how your readers interpret your story. It's hard not to think that critics are judging your life as well as your work. (2009, p. 230).

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I knew I needed to delve deeper.

- **Empathy**

In developing the person-centred approach to counselling, Carl Rogers recognised empathy as being necessary within the counsellor / helper relationship. Empathy is a core element of all helping relationships, and although difficult to define, can be described as the ability to understand what the client is feeling.

The person-centred counsellors role is to follow what the client is feeling and to communicate to them that you understand what you are feeling. Rogers described accurate empathic understanding as:

> The state of empathy, or being empathic, is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the 'as if' condition. Thus it means to sense the hurt and the pleasure of another as he senses it and to perceive the causes thereof as she perceives them, but without ever losing the recognition that it is as if I were hurt or pleased or so forth. If this 'as if' quality is lost, then the state is one of identification. (Rogers, 1980, p. 140)

However, empathy can be conscious and unconscious. Rothschild (2006,) writes that conscious empathy is a desirable capacity:

> Making it possible for us to relate to the experiences of others, to 'walk in their shoes' so to speak. It is part and parcel of being human. Empathy leads to compassion by giving us insight into anothers state of being. (p.29).

So, while conscious empathy can be understood as the ability to feel another persons emotions while remaining grounded, unconscious empathy can be described as feeling another persons emotions – but getting lost in them. Unconscious empathy can be harmful. Traditional counselling teaches counsellors to understand the necessity of experiencing and communicating empathy with clients. Counsellors are trained in techniques such as 'mirroring' but rarely are trainees made aware that unconscious empathy may leave us facing psychological risk (Etheringron, 2008). Babette Rothschild (2006) points out that we are most vulnerable to burnout in our work, when we become so focused on the distress of those in our care that we neglect our own increasing discomfort. Was I suffering from burnout?

Upon reflection, I interpret the vignettes I had written with increased anger in Part 1. Could these be interpreted as my own helplessness within the system within which I work? Through writing the stories of the people I met in practice, Abdullah, Tony, Elena and the Man with the Bag; describing the cruel and unjust system, am I somehow mirroring their experiences of the same system? Are my own feelings of helplessness a parallel re-enactment of the clients' experience? These questions are beyond the scope of this research currently, but are worth exploring personally.

- **Countertransference:**

I use the term countertransference as a name for my experience, to refer to the way in which my own internal world is relevant to my work. Having found myself in a position of hopelessness, helplessness and anger; how meeting with a certain group of clients triggered something in me, then I use the term countertransference to denote what is happening to me unconsciously. Writing into my disorienting dilemmas, I identified in my reflections that countertransference was at play. Kahn defines countertransference as;

Encompassing all the therapist's feelings & attitudes towards the client.

> Much of what goes on in the minds of our clients … is hidden to them. Each person's history, each person's deepest wishes, impulses, and fears lie out of sight. Nevertheless, they powerfully influence the person's behaviours and conscious attitudes…this influence works as strongly in the therapist (counsellor) as in the client. (1997, p. 127).

Freud originally thought of countertransference as an obstacle, which the therapist needed to overcome; however over the years therapists gradually came to recognise that no matter how much personal counselling or supervision they had, or how 'well analysed' they might be; inevitably two complex dramas were being played out in every counselling room. And one of them was going on within the mind of the counsellor. Therefore, the more aware the counsellor was of countertransference, the safer the client would be. In 1968, Heinrich Racker went a step further by identifying countertransferences as being either an obtrusive (complimentary) or useful (concordant) phenomenon, which can interfere with the counsellors clarity and empathy (Judge-Preston, 2011). Useful countertransference feelings and attitudes are those that an alert counsellor succeeds in employing to the clients advantage by continuing to observe and ponder them, until they becomes 'empathie insights' (Kahn, 1997).

Sexton & Whiston (1994) define countertransference as our own distorted reaction to the 'other', and describe how we must work to understand the wide array of perceptual filters that we bring to the helping relationship: our personal history; our major demographic variables, such as age, ethnicity, religion, gender, and socioeconomic status; our family of origin and its biases; our trauma and pain. Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016, p. 82) note that:

> Understanding all of these perpetual filters, and their impact on our reaction to the 'other' is hard, hard work…understanding countertransference means swimming against the current. The temptation is always to turn around and go with the current.

Clarkson & Nuttall (2000) identify two broad types of countertransference. 'Proactive' Countertransference, which was first identified by Freud, is concerned with the counsellors;

> Own past experience, current preoccupation or future hopes and fears. (p. 362)

While 'Reactive' countertransference, identified by Heimann (1950) contains;

> Reactions or responses to the clients past experience, current preoccupation or future hopes, fears and fantasies. (p. 362)

Reflecting back, I understand that I was experiencing proactive or useful countertransference.

Some unexpected learning emerged, through writing my own story, regarding lifelong issues I have with belonging and home. Upon reflection, it becomes clear that my buttons were being pressed by people presenting to practice homeless or at risk of losing their home. In Part 2 in particular, when I write about the two disorienting dilemmas I experienced in January 2019 – the professional (meeting the Man with the Bag) and the personal (my mother disclosing she was selling the family home) I begin to understand at a deeper level, how my own story had unresolved issues regarding home and belonging. My traumatic move aged 16 and subsequent painful attempts to belong in the new school, culminating in the incident where I ran away; the sadness I felt when I thought about my 16-year-old self, letting myself into an empty house, our old family home, and realising it was no longer my home. A move north to Belfast to university and many years of feeling settled and belonging in a place where I was constantly reminded that I did not belong! Openly referred to as the 'Mexican' working in the restaurant, and the 'outsider' in East Belfast. I examined my relationship with my husband and how our different cultural backgrounds seemed to matter to others more than us. Our reluctant move to Dublin for better work opportunities, and the subsequent conversations since

then as our family expanded, of whether or not we should move back to Northern Ireland.

Meeting the Man with the Bag brought everything together for me. Meeting this man, who was quite literally transient with his whole life and that of his family shoved into a bag that sat between us on the floor of my office unnerved me. It caused me great anxiety, yet, though writing the story, it awakened my senses to my own family's issues pertaining to belonging, as well as loss, identity, religion, culture and the holding spaces around all of these things. While the Man with the Bag was looking for a place for him and his family to belong, I was doing the same for my own family. Albeit mine was from a place of privilege, while his was from a place of great poverty, unfairness and cruelty. What was happening for me is summed up well by Rothschild (2006, p. 1):

> Towards the end of the Haunted Mansion ride at Disneyland, the black coach I'm riding in turns to face a mirror. I can clearly see the reflections of myself and the friends I'm riding with. There is also the faded reflection of one or more ghosts who appear to be riding along with us in our laps. They are smiling and carrying suitcases, intent on hitching a ride home with us. Of course, at the end of the ride, there are not really any ghosts hanging onto us, nor are they in the car when we get home. With our clients, however, that is not always the case. Sometimes it seems that some of them are more successful than the Haunted Mansion ghosts. In essence, they hitch a ride home with us – or more accurately, inside of us. Often we are not aware we have brought home an unwelcome visitor unless we notice that we are agitated rather than relaxed.

- **Resilience**

As a practitioner, I have learned that I need to work on my own resilience. If I am being weighed down by my 'own stuff', then I am not going to be of best use to the client. I have addressed this somewhat in the previous pages in

relation to shifting my gaze from the external to the internal. Autoethnography has helped me to do this and I hope to continue with the practice of reflexive writing to give me breathing space to pause and improve my professional self-awareness as I journey onwards. A study by Frattaroli (2006) found that expressive writing can change a persons' mental and physical health. Therefore, by writing my story, and the stories of those I meet, and expressing my feelings in this way is helping me to resource myself better for this work, and to understand myself better.

I have learned that I need to adapt in a more positive way to the challenging situations that present to practice, in order to remain resilient in this work. Building my resilience will in turn allow me to be better equipped to meet whoever walks in the door in practice. Skovolt & Trotter-Mathison (2016) define resilience as;

> A person's ability to adapt in a positive way to difficult or trying circumstances. (p. 3)

Professionals on the frontline in this work face numerous stressors within their practice:

> Including time pressures, workload, multiple roles and emotional issues. Frequent workplace stress can impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of health professionals and result in burnout and, in some cases, traumatic stress-like symptoms. (McCann et al, 2013, p. 60)

According to Lucy Hearne (2012), professional resilience and burnout prevention are pertinent to guidance practitioners who are exposed to clients' traumatic stories over time. In her study with University of Limerick on *The Impact of High Touch Work in Challenging Times (2012),* Hearne highlighted the challenges for guidance practitioners in dealing with escalating numbers and complex issues, outlining that that the nature of this 'high touch' work in an under-resourced sector may lead to:

A diminution of guidance counselling skills over a prolonged period, as well as disaffection due to the repetitive nature of the work and practitioners performing more like automatons than helpers. (p.5)

- **Meeting Those Without a Home, Without Hope**

Working as a Counsellor in homeless shelters in the USA, Zach Bruns describes homelessness as:

A complex status that may be layered with shame, guilt, addiction, trauma, family strife, legal pitfalls, economic and employment barriers, and inadequate physical and mental health treatment. (2019, p. 87).

Meeting people who are homeless can be both challenging and desperately sad. As practitioners in the helping industry, we go into this work because we care. We want to make a difference. If you are meeting with troubled people over and over again, day after day, in 'high touch' work, you need to be aware of the intensity of this work and how you manage yourself in it.

High touch is highly skilled professional attachment, involvement, and separation over and over again with one person after another. (Skovholt &Trotter- Mathison, 2011, p.106).

It involves:

Respect, constant empathy, one-way caring, understanding and energy for the client. (Hearne, 2012, p. 1).

As a practitioner, I started to understand that meeting people who were homeless and who were under duress to attend our service, or risk losing their payment was in turn causing me great anxiety. Meeting people like Abdullah, Tony, Elena and the Man with the Bag and hearing their stories of tragedy and hopelessness started to have an effect on my own health as hopelessness crept into my thinking. At this time, I was asking what hope was there for these people? What hope was there for us as practitioners in this work, trying to assist these hopeless people under this awful system? Reflecting back upon their stories that I had written in Part 1, my own hopelessness and helplessness

was obvious. What was emerging for me through this research was the understanding that I needed to resource myself to be hopeful with this challenging client group, as much for them as for me. Yet in order to resource myself to be hopeful, I needed to go back a bit. Asking myself the question, how do you provide guidance counselling for people who are hopeless, led me to read around narrative approaches to guidance counselling.

- **Narrative Approaches & the Importance of Story**

In Part 1, I made reference to stories being fundamental to the constructivist approach. Supporters of narrative inquiry believe that stories are integral to the way people lead their lives. And the story, with its narrative truth, is at the heart of career theory and practice (Savicas, 2011).

> Consistent with the use of narratives and storied approaches, career counseling provides greater opportunity for clients to reflect on their career situation. (McMahon, Watson, 2013, p. 277-286).

People make sense of their lives and construct their identities through stories. As guidance counselors, listening to the stories of others, we interact with them and together we co-construct new stories. Within the field of career guidance, approaches by Cochrane, Admunson and Savicas have assisted people to construct a workable self-narrative (Reinekke, 2014). By analysing stories people tell about themselves we can understand how they make their lives meaningful. McIlveen & Patton, (2007, p. 228) claim that:

> As with a literary story, the plots of personal narrative bring coherence, structure, and a heuristic through which to understand a person's story.

When working with clients who do not present with additional barriers such as homelessness; those who enter freely into the career guidance process, there are a number of tools which I would utilise in practice in terms of the narrative approach. For example, Peterson and Stebleton's (2007) Positive Life Stories; the Career Style Interview (Savicas, 2009) and McMahon and Watson's Storytelling Approach (2010). These tools can be useful in terms of moving a

person on from telling their own story, to a place where they can identify patterns and begin to interpret life themes within their story as a first step in working towards action.

However, when working with a more challenging client group, such as those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, I was not sure what approach to try at all. How do you provide career guidance counselling to those who are hopeless?

I found the work of Norman Amundson's 'Active Engagement' to be a source of assistance here. Creating a bridge between the theory of narrative guidance and the realities of community practice, Admundson's Active Engagement Model (2006) encourages the use of creativity when working with clients. Through the Active Engagement Model, the guidance counselor's role is to assist the client to make meaning from their stories:

> The client comes to realise that his or her effort here-and-now exemplifies an attempt to combine intention and actions in agentic functioning. The experience of active engagement during the career counselling process can reinforce the sense of human agency. (Maree, 2011).

Admunson's work focused on the fact that counseling can be more than just two people in a room talking, and use of visual imagery and physical activity with the client (such as going for a walk), were necessary and helpful. Introducing tools such as flip charts were a useful source of imagery to help the client to make meaning from their story. Admundson carried out further research into the role of metaphors in the process of 'meaning and knowledge construction in life and career' (Admundsun, 2010, p.7). For example, the emotional roller coaster metaphor (Borgen & Amundson, 1987) which can be used with people who are unemployed to use as a discussion of the ups and downs of the job seeking journey (the roller-coaster of emotions); or the roadblock metaphor where barriers to progression are used as blocks on a map (Athanasou, Van Esbroeck, 2008 p., 331).

- **Resourcing Myself to be Hopeful with this Challenging Client Group**

> Hope is inextricably linked to the human condition. Be it a virtue or a psychological construct, hope has the general characteristic of being a motivator for positive change in people's lives. (Edwards, Jovanovski, 2016, p. 77)

Finding Gray Poehnell's (2011) Hope-Filled Engagement Model as a tool in practice, I felt like I had struck gold. With direct experience of working with diverse groups of people on the fringes of society in Canada and Australia, Poehnell wrote:

> Hopelessness is truly inclusive; it can affect anyone, no matter the age, gender, race, religion, or socio-economic status. It can creep up on you or slam you in the face. It takes many form and is like a weed – it will take root and thrive in almost any environment. (2011, p. 3).

One of the recommendations Gray Poehnell makes in his Hope-Filled Engagement Model is for practitioners to be creative in their work – to step outside of our prescribed roles and to meet the client as a person. This sits well with the person-centred approach to career guidance counselling where we treat clients, as Carl Rogers taught, with genuineness, empathy and unconditional positive regard.

The Hope-Filled Engagement Model very simply gets us to think about what we *can* do with this person, instead of what we *can't.* This was the light-bulb moment for me, when I understood that I had spent so much time focusing on the negative of each person's situation, and the unfairness of each life, as well as the rigidity of the system within which I worked, that I missed the positive element – What *can* I do? Resourcing myself with hopefulness, I was suddenly able to see new possibilities to help those who were hopeless. In the time we have together – what was the most hopeful way to spend this time for them? What *can* I do, instead of *can't?*

Poehnell's model of Hope-Filled Engagement talks about working under 'constraints and freedom' where:

> The disciplined preparation and practice combined with intuitive risk-taking sets you free to innovate. (2016, 48:24).

In other words, I have 50 minutes to spend with this person – how can I be creative within the discipline of rules under which I work?

The model taught me that learning to improvise between the constraints of practice we face (rules, systems, etc.) and freedom (being creative and flexible in what we do) will set us free in the system. As practitioners, we have the discipline of preparation and practice to deal with the things we have to do (rules, etc.) but we can combine this with intuitive risk taking and freedom. For example, making the client a cup of tea as I had done with Elena. Or turning off the screen while we had our space together.

As practitioners, we work in a field with some very desperate problems and often no easy solutions. This provides more than enough reasons to be pessimistic. If, as a practitioner, I can choose to be hopeful beyond the problems that are here now, in doing this, I can help my client to reach new possibilities. Poehnell believes that hope is a core competency we need to develop in our lives as we work with people who have multiples challenges. It is my role therefore to go alongside the client and:

> Hope for them when they cannot hope for themselves. (Poehnell, 2016, 3:59)

Hope, according to Poehnell's model is very simply:

> Seeing something we don't have. (2016, 12:45).

As practitioners, we can create an environment of hope, even with the most hopeless cases. We do this very simply by being present to the client, letting them know they have value, and that they matter. My time with the person is to forget all the problems in the system within which we work, or the organisation I'm in, or the administrative duties required as part of the contract

– my time with this person is to show them that they matter. That right now, they are important and I'm listening to their story.

By creating an environment of hope for the people we meet, by letting them know they matter. And that they have value as a person.

So how I meet that person matters. Asking them their name, and to tell their story can be enough. Asking them their favourite things in life can show the real person begin to emerge.

> They see themselves in the eyes of others as failures. I want them to see themselves in their own eyes in what they are really doing and the value of it. It makes sense to ask them this as we are asking them about themselves, about 'me'. (Poehnell, 2016, 34:02).

If my time with this person is just to show them they matter, this is what I do.

> How I meet a person, greet them, look them in the eye; how I stay focused on that person, listening to them, I want them to know I am listening to them and they are important right now. (Poehnell, 2016, 35:12).

So when a person walks into my office who is homeless or at risk of, I see them as a whole person with a plethora of cultural, social, gender, trauma stories. This is a complex piece of work. To try and ignore that and to tick boxes that match on a system will not work. People are more complex than that.

- **Resourcing Myself to be Hopeful in the Neoliberal Paradigm**

We are living through a time of profound social changes. The last three decades in particular shows a marked change to how work is viewed in society. We have moved from a notion of full employment with job security to a model of work flexibility, flexible locations and hours, reduced pay and social security. This can clearly be seen in the governments tender for contracting employment

services where they want a service to be able to 'scale up or scale down' at a moments notice. Within this system as an employee, I am vulnerable, as I in turn deal with the even more vulnerable service user.

As practitioners we are expected to be capable of supporting people with high support needs, including mental and physical health issues, (Hearne 2012, Bimrose, 2010) under diminishing budgets; while the neoliberal agenda of a target driven culture increases daily work pressures and perpetuates the view that guidance needs to prove its economic worth (Douglas, 2011, Hearne 2012).

I have learned about the absurdity of the neoliberal system. The system within which I work does not see us as people with internal worlds. Rather, we are 'roles'. My role is that of 'Case Officer, a name which gradually sneaked into our service in the past few years through memos received from 'above' (DEASP, our contractors). As a trained Guidance Counsellor, this title bothers me; not out of any attachment I have to having a grandiose title, but because by its wording it implies a less person-centred role. The person, be that Abdullah, Tony, Elena or the Man with the Bag are seen as 'cases', while I am the 'officer' - the one in control. If the case does not do what the officer recommends by way of the scripted process they risk having their social welfare payment cut off. This is far from how the role of the Guidance Counsellor should be, and how I identify as a professional trained in a person-centred way. I use the analogy of a supermarket checkout here. Within this neoliberal paradigm where I work, I am the Supermarket Checker. I pick each item, scan each barcode (client) and pass to the end of the conveyor belt. I then reach for the next item (client) and do the same again. This is the way the neoliberal agenda wants us to work with people – to treat them like barcodes. Picked up, processed, moved on. Except in the person-centred world, people are not barcodes, but unique individuals with feelings and stories and families and worries. They are not all the same and cannot be worked with as if they are.

The very fact that career guidance is delivered within this neoliberal structure, which is target-driven and controlled by the state, affects the changing

discourse around professionalism among career guidance practitioners (Douglas, 2011). Examining this from a critical Faucauldian perspective, Douglas describes the practice of career guidance being used:

> As an instrument to promote and implement particular representations of the 'truth' through government policy. (p.166).

Foucault's concepts have enabled social scientists to study the various ways welfare state institutions 'regulate life' and as coercive institutions 'discipline society' (Lacombe, 1996). Douglas (2011,) writes that while Foucault's argument was that power cannot exist without resistance:

> Guidance counselors in this contracted work who identify with having a profession have few spaces for dissent, and resistance is therefore expressed through their resistance to personal values. (p. 163).

From a professional standpoint, I believe the 'one size fits all' approach we are forced to adhere to, is not best practice. Allowing a system where Guidance Counsellors have more flexibility, to allow us to deal with the 'reality' presented by clients lives would result in better outcomes for people longer term. Professionalising our industry and trusting us as professionals to make our assessments on how long we can work with clients is another.

Opening myself up to writing my own story in Part 2, the 16 year old me who made the traumatic house move is alive and well. Reflecting upon myself, I begin to understand dimensions of my personality. I've just begun to realise that it has always been so important to me to advocate against structures of power where I perceive abuse of power, or a 'weaker person' being subjected to unfairness. Could this stem from my own powerlessness around this traumatic move almost 30 years ago? I was powerless to act then, but I am not powerless now and can use this power to help other people manoeuvre through this tough neoliberal system.

According to Hughes (2017), one of the most important rationales for doing autoethnography is precisely to help reveal power, domination, privilege and penalty in both the extraordinary and mundane social issues of our larger cultural contexts.

I have learned through my research that the neoliberal system in which I work does not see us as people with internal worlds, but roles. Within this process, our narrative contexts are not taken into consideration. Neoliberalism denies us of lived realities, which are too messy and complex. The stories and vignettes I told, both my own and the people I met show some of this messiness and complexity which happens in peoples' lives. As a guidance counsellor, I am a context into which the other person arrives; trained to listen by means of allowing that internal life to be touched off, evoking empathy and using myself as a filler for meaning.

I am influenced in my thinking by Erich Fromm, the German social psychologist. Fromm was interested in the psychological effects that large social systems have on individuals, and the increasing sense of alienation that seemed to characterise all men. In his work 'The Art of Being' he writes:

> A person who has not been completely alienated, who has remained sensitive and able to feel, who has not lost the sense of dignity, who is not yet "for sale", who can still suffer over the suffering of others, who has not acquired fully the having mode of existence - briefly, a person who has remained a person and not become a thing - cannot help feeling lonely, powerless, isolated in present-day society. He cannot help doubting himself and his own convictions, if not his sanity. He cannot help suffering, even though he can experience moments of joy and clarity that are absent in the life of his "normal" contemporaries. Not rarely will he suffer from neurosis that results from the situation of a sane man living in an insane society, rather than that of the more conventional neurosis of a sick man trying to adapt himself to a sick society. In the process of going further in his analysis, i.e. of growing to greater

independence and productivity, his neurotic symptoms will cure themselves. (P. 65).

This quote accurately reflects the experience of my research, this living journey of self. I have transformed from where I was at the start of the journey to where I am now, in a better way of being. My perspective has shifted. I have learned that the battle I was fighting against the neoliberal paradigm may never be won, but I can recognise it for what it is, and remain hopeful and grounded with the clients I meet within it. I have learned to live in this system that keeps us afraid and unstable and to keep my sanity and offer the best I can to those I meet. By harnessing hope in a system that thrives on doubt, fear and hopelessness; by retaining my compassion, sensitivity, empathy, hope and self-respect in my practice, I am resisting the neoliberal paradigm.

- **Epistemological Wars**

Throughout this journey I have battled an epistemological war. Heavily drawn to the methodology of autoethnography from the beginning, I resisted it time and time again. I feared opening up to it. In Part 2, at my first group supervision I write about how I explained to the group how I had 'done' the methodology of autoethnography previously and so this time wanted to learn something new. I consistently battled with the way my research was leading me internally, towards autoethnography. This was mirrored in the fight I was playing out in work where I felt this clash between the person-centred approach and the neoliberal paradigm.

Reflecting on this now, nine months later, I may finally have the answer. I discovered a way of knowing over a decade ago when I first came to Maynooth University to complete the postgraduate training in guidance counselling (2008 – 2010). During this experience, I learned to open up to my internal world, utilising every opportunity for reflexive practice in the spaces provided. Here, the internal world mattered.

But when I finished this training, and published my work, I left this internal world behind, returning to the external world of work and systems. In this external world, less and less time was devoted to personal development and reflexive practice. And even less time was devoted to reminding ourselves that the individuals we meet in practice were people, not systems - with experiences, feelings, problems and worries.   I returned to this way of learning last September. However after a decade of being out in the system, doing the work I am being told to do, 'processing people' and being told we can't think about the internal, I found myself at war with myself, battling between the internal and external worlds.

Having fought this battle, I have won. But just for now. I understand that the battle was within, but continuous self-reflections, care and attendance at supervision is required to remain resilient in this work.

- **Telling their stories: Abdullah, Tony, Elena and the Man with the Bag**

This research has been a living inquiry; an intimate account combining a mixture of biography and self-analysis, used to reflect on myself and my practice during a particular time in history, during Irelands housing crisis. The researcher's experience was the main focus of my inquiry. However this inquiry cannot be concluded without honouring the people behind the stories I told– Abdullah, Tony, Elena, the Man with the Bag, and the many more nameless people I met in practice over the last two years, and continue to meet, who are experiencing similar housing crisis situations.

Reading their stories is a haunting reality of what is happening in Ireland to families today. I have no control over changing this system, but what I can do is show a piece of my world, and tell the stories of suffering I meet within it. Maybe it will be read and understood better by those in policy? Maybe it will not be read at all. I believe I have a responsibility to the people I meet to document their very real human suffering. This research shows the tough

reality of what life is like first hand for practitioners working on the front-line, as well as the very human tragedy of those people battling homelessness on a daily basis. These are stories of real lives in Ireland today. And there are thousands of them.

Telling their stories gives them a voice that is not heard within the system. They are unable to tell their own stories now as they battle to survive each day, by finding the next place to sleep, getting their kids fed and cleaned and to school, and maintaining their meager jobseekers payment. This is a job in itself. To then have to meet with a 'Case Officer' and account for how they are seeking employment opportunities is cruel. But they are managing it. Staying alive in this madness has becomes their present job.

Their stories need to be heard because their stories are forming part Ireland's modern history – albeit a very cruel history.
Telling their stories is critical social research.

Conclusion

As an autoethnographer, I became aware of a problem I was having at work. Adopting the inward, critical and reflexive gaze of autoethnography (Hughes, 2017) allowed me to both make sense of my problem, and more importantly, show how by revealing our ordinary problems, how the thoughts and actions related to them can be translated into critical social research.

Armed with a newfound resilience, I go forward stronger, with vitality, and better equipped for this work. I can progress with a deeper understanding of what 'presses my own buttons' in practice, and a better understanding of why I struggled with meeting those who were homeless, or at risk of losing their home. Having developed a deeper understanding of my own issues, and recognising countertransference at play, I will address these issues in supervision or private therapy. I have learned that I am a person who has deep-rooted personal issues with belonging and home, and at time of writing, a very real scenario is playing out in my own life regarding where my family and I

belong.   I acknowledge that these issues emerged for me through countertransference as my own life history has coloured my reactions. (Hough, 2006).

I have removed my own bags out of my office for now, and am allowing more space for the client.

As a guidance counsellor, I am using narratives to assist individuals to make life transitions. Giving them space to tell their story and meeting them as they are is key.   Initially, at the beginning of my research, I struggled with how I could offer any help at all to the people presenting, whose situations remained hopeless, and inhibited by the system.   But I have learned what I *can* do. I can step outside of my role within the system and meet these people where they are at; and I can let them know that they matter. I can remain hopeful for them. I can give them space and listen to their story, in exactly where they are at.

Offering them tea.

Treating them like humans.

Telling them they matter.

And listening to their story.

This living inquiry of self has reminded me of the value of reflexivity, which is paramount to critical practice. I have made use of reflexivity in the way in which I have reflected upon myself and my practice. An exhausting process at the time, there were many points along this journey that my research felt like a jumbled mess. By allowing myself to be aware in the moment, I started to learn what influenced my own internal and external responses. Going forward, I have learned the value of being reflexive in practice, and seeking out or creating space which will assist me in this work. The invaluable learning space, which has held me throughout this programme has:

Wisely held me back from my linear rush into becoming someone I had never been, and instead encouraged me to slow down and pause for a bit. (O'Neill, 2015, p. 8).

I have learned through my research, that the struggles I have in practice are part of a much wider context. I cannot undo the structure of neoliberalism within my world of work, but my experience has provided me with a sense of agency. I can sit calmer in the system now, and provide a hope-filled space for the people I meet. Working more independently of the system, and keeping my focus on this, I feel liberated.

As important as methods may be, the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside of us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more sure-footed our [work] and living becomes. (Palmer, 1998, p. 5).

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June 2019: The Next Chapter in My Story

As I write the conclusion for my research, I am overwhelmed. With a week to go to the final draft being handed in, I got ill. Shingles. I am totally drained and confined to bed. I am quite literally stuck. Lying in my bed gives me a lot of time to think. I'm not surprised I'm sick, that my body has had enough. I'm under serious pressure. Work is so difficult right now as the incoming tender and future of our service is unknown. I'm feeling huge guilt that I can't do more to help my mother in her search for a new home. This MEd is tough…I should never have signed up to a programme with my kids this young. They need too much of me right now and it's not fair. Our conversations as a couple has upped a level as we start to seriously discuss a move back North again. The last three months in particular have been especially difficult as we deal with our son being bullied at school. He is deeply unhappy, begging us to send him to a new school. We are listening to him, being present to him, building resilience, liaising with his teacher, communicating; but his anxiety is increasing.

Please Mum, can I go to a new school. Will you find me a new school where people don't spit in my lunch and where kids are kind?

Son, if you want to go to a new school we will look into this with you. But it's not an easy process and it takes a while to sort. But yes, we will look at this option for you and we will see what's possible.

Can I go to Rachel's school?

My heart freezes… our good friend Rachel works in a school in Northern Ireland. He knows the place well, as we attend the school fundraisers and events annually. Our friends' children Brian and Luke also go to this school.

Please Mum, can I go to school there with Brian & Luke?

That school is very far away pet. It wouldn't be possible to travel there every day because we live in Dublin. But we can look at other schools around this area for you.

Can't we just move to Belfast? We could live in the mobile near Granny?

My heart…

We could, couldn't we?

This is all getting too much for me.

He is not even ten years old. He is a child. We are the adults. I need to say it's not possible. We live in Dublin, we work in Dublin; this is where our home is and our work is. My job as a parent is to help him to resolve these issues at school or find him a new school. In Dublin!

I start calling primary schools around our area. All the Educate Together schools are full to capacity. I even try neighbouring counties. Not a chance.
I start calling the catholic schools. Every answer is the same…Do you have a baptismal cert? There is a long waiting list. Enrolment priority does go to those who meet all the criteria…. i.e. those who have baptismal certs.
It's the same with the church of Ireland schools. Waiting lists, but priority does go to children baptised in the faith. 1950's Ireland is alive and well! Even south of the border we are still not free of the religious labels of protestant and catholic. And we worry that only in Northern Ireland we could be perceived as 'different' when we can't find a school to accept our children here? The catholic schools are not supposed to do this but they can. Especially in areas of high populations. Another system to be angry towards! Another battle ahead!

My rage starts to build.

Where do we belong?

Who will accept us?

We can't move back to Belfast because our 9-year old child wants to go to a school there!

…Or can we?

We know we would get places for the children as religion doesn't come into it. Our privilege of affording the private fees opens that door.

The Man with the Bag didn't have these choices.

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