

## **Nondual Awareness and Counseling Curriculum: A Student Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Nonduality has been defined as a perennial thread running through wisdom traditions ranging from Buddhism to Advaita Vedanta. This thread offers various teachings and practices, such as meditation, transpersonal development, and contemplative self-awareness. A growing body of data has demonstrated the therapeutic benefits that nonduality can have for mental health professionals and their patients. Counseling curricula, however, do little to impart nondual language or perspectives, impeding the impact nondual awareness can have on both faculty and students. I sought to address this deficiency through a case study of a counseling student's experience of nonduality in a training program. My hypothesis is that for a nondual dialectic to become transformational for counseling students, specific allowances and adaptations must be made at the curricular level, to establish counseling of whatever approach to include the learning of a state of *being* and not exclusively counseling as *doing*. I conducted a one-on-one semi-structured interview with focused questions designed to create a framework of nondual understanding and its expression in counseling labs, courses, and practicums. The findings support the hypothesis that nondual awareness can enhance the best outcomes of counseling students in a wide array of curricular programming. Recommendations extend these findings into a general framework that counseling programs could use to tailor their curricula to maximize the value of nonduality for students and faculty alike.

*Keywords:* Nonduality, nondual awareness, counseling curriculum, student perspective, transformational learning

### **Introduction**

The research conducted on the interjection of nonduality into counseling programs can be broken down into two primary dimensions: first, the degree and extent to which nondual wisdom is integrated into the curriculum, and second, how this integration is both qualified and quantified. The understanding of these variables is methodologically murky, given that nondual awareness cannot be fully captured by any philosophical or spiritual endeavor. "Nonduality is a particularly imprecise notion, first because there are many types of dualisms, and second because nonduality negates an unspecified dualism in an unspecified way" (Hartelius, 2015a, p. v-a). I address these ambiguities with a two-step definition that not only clarifies for counseling curricula what nonduality is, but also provides a psychologically resonant method from which students experience an immediate and felt awareness of unified consciousness through perceiving and practicing counseling as an awareness of *being* and not counseling as effort based *doing*.

First is the work of Judith Blackstone (2006), which lays the foundational definition of the core basis of any psychotherapeutic training as being based on therapeutic rapport, per Carl Rogers (1967), who was the pioneer of person-centered therapy that forms the backbone of today's growing schools of counseling. Blackstone (2006) expands Rogers' concepts of therapeutic rapport to include receptivity to and participation in a much larger inter-subjective field: "Nondual realization is a subtler attunement and greater openness to the intersubjective relational field.... [It] does not eradicate intersubjectivity; rather, it encompasses and illuminates it" (p. 26). The nondual vision of "not-two" impacts rapport in two important ways: the first is authentic transformation arising from the therapist and client's co-exploration of what *is*, not what should be, could be, or needs to be. The second is that nonduality in the counselor's office or classroom allows a presentation of authentically deep questions and self-inquiry, such as "who am I?" In doing so, trainees are given the primary insight and psychological tool of nonduality: that being itself is sufficient and never in lack.

In this light, not only are students instructed on how to build and maintain strong working relationships with their clients, they are also able to discover that the physical space in which a counseling session takes place is a field of a-priori connection that is ready for them to draw from. This reality cannot be underestimated, given the burden students feel to acquire skillsets and psychological models above and beyond the simplicity of each moment in which they are interacting.

The question that naturally emerges from this relational oneness that Blackstone (2002, 2006, 2008) describes is how to link, in a manner that is empirically verifiable, the interdependence of subject and object, perceiver and perceived, in a counseling curriculum. Toward this end, I add to my definition the somatic phenomenology developed by Glen Hartelius (2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Hartelius (2015a) proposes that nondual mindfulness is based on the premise that the habituated sense of being a fixed and separate self is not only fictitious, but the very source of suffering. Using somatic awareness, counseling, students can tune into what Hartelius (2015b) refers to as "attentional posture" (p. 1272), or the places in the body that register a student's felt sense of self in relationship to wholeness:

The definition of nonduality and the methodology of somatic phenomenology connect around three key principles:

- a. a clear intention for the practice and cultivation of mindfulness;
- b. non-elaborative attention to the present moment experience
- c. an attitude of openness, curiosity, and acceptance of what is perceived

These three principles constitute the very foundation of a counseling training program, providing students with tools to support their growth and development as agents of change and healing. This is a therapeutic support based on counseling as *being* and not counseling as *doing*.

In my experience, somatic phenomenology, coupled with Blackstone's (2006, 2008) interconnected subjective field, is essential for enabling counseling students to assimilate a meaningful and tangible understanding of nonduality. Time after time I have witnessed students take an orientation such as transpersonal psychology and exclusively focus on

the transcendent, while bypassing the importance of healthy interpersonal boundaries, ego strength and an overall sensibility of day to day practicalities. By directing the intention of oneness toward therapeutic realities such as addiction, depression, marital health and strong coping skills, counseling students are forestalled from misguided attempts at offering clients harmful platitudes that use the interconnectivity of consciousness as a substitute for honestly exploring the causes and consequences of suffering bringing them to counselling in the first place

The primary intention of this case study was to demonstrate the flexible utility of nonduality that gives students in training the ability to apply the reality that their selfhood is not a fixed and separate point in any therapeutic school. "Awakening nondual awareness adds a depth dimension to any of the existing schools of psychology, regardless of orientation, through the psychotherapist's deepening awareness" (Prendergast, 2003, pp. 4–5).

This phenomenological case study was designed to examine the impact that nondual teachings and practices have on a counseling curriculum, from a student's perspective. The primary research question was, "What was your experience of nondual languages in a counseling training program?" From this foundational question, the following sub-questions emerged:

- a. What characteristics enabled you to recognize nondual communication in your counseling program as distinct from a therapeutic vernacular?
- b. What primary means were used within your curriculum to gain proficiencies in nondual awareness in the light of practicing counseling skills?
- c. What constitutes a mature experience of nonduality?

In short, I hoped to learn from this case study how the interjection of nonduality transforms and shapes a counseling student's pedagogical experience. These explorations offer contributions to any healing modality that students might encounter in their training, such as existentialism and its focus on personal responsibility, or cognitive behavioral therapy and its focus on cognitive and emotional health. More important, a nondual experience empowers counseling students to use any therapeutic teaching and practice in service of the *via negativa* defined by depth psychology: "Therapeutically, the doubt that Freud and Jung offered was not so much in what they did or said, but in what they didn't do and what they didn't say" (Leighton, 2014a, p. 382). Thus, there can be silence in speaking, stillness in doing, and repose while seeking a solution to suffering within any framework of therapy.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The nature of nonduality***

One could make the argument that most counseling programs focus exclusively on the individual "I." This directs students' assimilation and application of theory to the suffering of the perceived separate self. Countering this myopia is the relationship nondual awareness has with the natural world, with ecopsychology (Roszak, 1992). The first nondual traditions were indigenous, nature-based realizations of unity with the entirety of nature, including birds, bears, fish, snow, mountains, winds, seasons and all the other

elements of the perceived, experienced and unseen worlds. Unlike natural theology, which seeks evidence in nature to support the existence of the divine, ecopsychology taps the heightened consciousness of nondual wisdom to include all aspects of the natural world. In this regard, Davis (2011) noted:

Without the veils of dualistic identity, the world emerges in ever more exquisite ways, revealing its intrinsic glory and richness. Everything, including ego, spirit, suffering, attachment, environmental destruction, toxic dumps, the outrageous beauty of a sunrise, and the grace of a bird rising from a pond is seen as an expression and manifestation of unconditional love. (p. 142)

### ***Student experience of nonduality***

Literature directly pertaining to a student's experience of nonduality in a counseling program is limited and related most directly to the dissemination of religion as a cultural variable in curriculum (Leighton, 2013). Approximations can be found in the work of Gary Tzu, director of the Addictions Counselling Program at the University of Lethbridge. Using students as coauthors and coresearchers, Gary Tzu has assisted students in every facet of nondual awareness, from the transformative reality of self-realization (Tzu, Bannerman, & Griffith, 2015) to a more academic application of the therapeutics of counseling training (Tzu, Bannerman, & McCallum, 2016; Tzu & Damgaard, 2015).

The greatest confluence of relevant literature for this case study can be found in discussions on the theoretical level of a counseling curriculum. This includes the aforementioned intersubjective analysis of nonduality, put forth by Blackstone (2008), relating directly to nondual contributions to the therapeutic alliance. Loy (1988, 2000) has done perhaps more than anyone else in the field of nonduality to develop a bridge between contemplative traditions and academic applications that have a direct impact on a counseling student's experience of nondual wisdom. Complementing Loy are clinical examples from works such as the ones by Fenner (2003), Prendergast (2003), and Hunt (2003), which apply basic principles of nonduality (choiceless awareness, prior wholeness) to specific counseling modalities.

Nondual models that translate into counseling theory, especially psychoanalytic theory, can be found in the extensive works of Ken Wilber (1985), which many transpersonal programs, such as the one at Naropa University (n.d.), use in their instruction of counseling students in nonduality. In this light, the work of Almaas (1998, 2011) could arguably be the clearest theoretical link to counseling curricula in the available literature, as it directly applies nonduality as a therapeutic tool for dislodging and transforming narcissism into expanded self-awareness. Finally, any discussion on the relevant literature pertaining to a counseling student's experience of nonduality would not be complete without the mention of depth psychologist James Hillman (1976, 1989). Unlike others in the field of psychology who extend a nondual, deconstructive lens to a multitude of phenomena, Hillman (1998) turns his inquiry to the profession itself, particularly the "healing fiction" (p. 8) that occurs when therapists ignore larger forces at work and assume the role of therapeutic proprietorship. The "fiction" that Hillman is referring to alludes to the fact that psychology's arrogant claims of domesticating and managing the psyche are continually rebutted by the endless emergence of addictions,

impulsive behaviors and pathologies. Every apparent healing, Hillman notes, has an element of fiction that must be acknowledged in order for creative and meaningful work to unfold in the therapeutic relationship.

### **Method**

The use of the case study method is widely recognized across multiple disciplines as a valid research approach when a deep and multidimensional phenomenon of interest is at stake (Patton, 1990). This is especially the case with a phenomenon such as a counseling student's experience of nonduality, which has received scant research attention. Since more and more counseling programs are beginning to explore nondual components in their curriculum (Naropa University, n.d.; University of Lethbridge, n.d.; University of Victoria, n.d.), it is vital that students' perspectives are not omitted from the phenomenological hermeneutic experience. Finally, as noted by Yin (2013), the single case study is particularly warranted when it is a "revelatory" case such as this, in which my participant is describing a novel phenomenon with little precedent in the field of counselling education.

In addition, the case study accounts for potential biases of the investigator's relationship with the material, such as my extensive involvement with nondual communities (Romanyshyn, 2001). This has included residence in an ashram in which guidance was provided in nondual realization, in concert with the realization of what it means to be fully human and responsible for one's position in life. In my case, the apex of realization was not enlightenment or nirvana, but rather the understanding that any attempt to separate the sacred and mundane results in immediate suffering and avoidance of relationship.

This unity of the mundane and sacred is also at the core of what counselling students are confronting when working with nonduality in their training. Just as my experience in nondual communities formed the case study I have been guided by, so too is a student's case built on experiences that something greater than themselves is forever married to the joys and disappointments of life, to the insights and blind-spots that are perennially joined with the transpersonal. Where my nondual realization was forged through encounter groups and deep meditative introspection, a counselling student undergoes the same transformational journey in the classrooms, labs and practicums of their curriculum. It is this type of parallel that allows the case study to be a language of connection between faculty and student.

Using the theoretical base of Gilham (2000, p. 2), in this case study I interpreted data from the literature and the interview as sources of evidence. "The naturalistic style of case study research makes it particularly appropriate to study human phenomena" (Babbie, 2001, p. 304). Patterns were established through content analysis or "the study of recorded human communications" (Babbie, 2001, p. 304). I then matched the information collected from the context of the dialogue with the themes from the research questions.

### **Subject**

I drew my subject from the University of Lethbridge's (n.d.) Addiction Counselling Program, where I teach. This program is unique in every respect, especially in terms of

undergraduate students receiving many opportunities to develop foundational skillsets. Student participation in this nondual-informed curriculum is in direct proportion to vulnerable self-disclosure, emotional intensity, existential honesty, and experiential risk in the context of counseling theory and practice.

Joanie (a pseudonym) is a graduate student, currently working on the completion of her thesis in the Masters in Education in Counselling Psychology program, with a focus on addictions and mental health. She has struggled with addiction due to ruptured attachments and other traumatic experiences. Her desperation to find wholeness and healing led her to the doorstep of nonduality seven years ago, when she was an undergraduate. Throughout her journey, she has had several experientially mature encounters with nondual awareness and has expressed the intention of making it a central part of her personal and professional life.

I contacted Joanie for her expertise and passion regarding the impact that nondual teachings and practices can have on beginning counseling students. Her master's thesis on nondual transformation and psychosis reflects her qualifications to speak on this subject, as do her teaching assistant roles in counseling labs with undergraduate students.

### ***Procedures***

I followed four pragmatic stages to maintain fidelity to Joanie's experience. First, I obtained verbal consent at the onset of the interview, not only for her participation without any restrictions or prohibitions, but also for the dissemination of the information shared into appropriate academic channels. Second, I conducted a tape-recorded interview, using research questions on the themes previously defined. All participant quotes in this paper are from that interview on July 13, 2016. Third, I transcribed the dialogue from the interview, using a phenomenological method. Fourth, all data associated with the case study, including the digital recording and paperwork, have been secured under lock and key.

As well, I followed the methodological considerations outlined by Case (2008) with respect to incorporating students as nondual co-researchers: I assessed (a) why Joanie was choosing to participate, (b) the experiences she has had with trying to gain nondual awareness, and (c) her experiences of assessment as she experiences this process. The interview took place in a private office to ensure her comfort and safety. I used a series of structured questions that focused collecting relevant data while providing Joanie adequate space to elaborate on her experiences of nonduality in a counseling program.

### ***Findings***

In my interview with Joanie, many themes and patterns emerged with respect to her experience of nondual awareness in her counseling program.

### ***Nondual awareness and curricular approach***

When asked how nonduality was introduced into her program and what it looked like,

Joanie recalled her first initiation without hesitation: “I can remember the very first moment when it was brought to my attention. It wasn’t ever labeled as nonduality, but looking back, with what I know now, I know that it was.” She went on to echo the most salient theme throughout the interview, which were her relationships with her professors. It is no coincidence that Joanie’s interview brought out two of the most indispensable prerequisites to access nondual awareness, which are questioning or self-inquiry, along with what is referred to in Buddhism as a *sangha*, or a community of relationships in which expanded consciousness is explored, communicated, and embodied. Early on in her counseling program Joanie had both, as the following reflection regarding a professor reveals:

I remember going to see him in his office and talking to him about some of these things, and just going on and on in this big room that I was stuck in, and then him just stopping me after, not even having any feedback. But he sent me on my way but said, “Just want you to really meditate on who is thinking these thoughts and who is feeling these feelings.”

The professor’s feedback points directly to the perception of the separate objective self and consequently, the recognition of the nondual. In fact, one could argue that the language of the nondual, whether contemplative or academic, points toward a suspicion that we are not the people we are pretending to be. Not only is this realization the core of nondual traditions, it is also increasingly found in counseling. “In contemporary theories of psychoanalysis, the notion of the self has come under increasingly skeptical scrutiny” (Blackstone, 2008, p. 449).

As Joanie disclosed, a counseling student might be instructed with the concept of nonduality and its import in professional settings, but the actual point at which the student assimilates the question of self in relationship is an entirely different demand. This would be akin to the point at which a foreign language ceases to be an intellectual add-on and becomes an intrinsic reality. Joanie said,

I’d never been asked these questions before. I’d never been questioned about who I am, or who is animating me, and so yeah, it stuck with me for a really long time. I thought about it for a really long time, because I didn’t really understand what it meant.

Joanie brought up an important point that is supported in many expressions of nondual teachings at a curricular level: specifically, the fact that nonduality, no matter how it is introduced or organized in a curriculum, is never intended to give students something above and beyond their instruction, such as to offer them better styles of counseling or slicker and more polished theories. As Joanie progresses through her counseling theory, she makes mention of the a priori wholeness, which I believe is the primary transformational agent of a nondual-informed counseling program. The search for an appropriate and effective therapeutic model is released as students realize that they already have what they need in order to be agents of change. In this context, Joanie said, “All of that stuff was already there inside me. It had been taught, or felt, or experienced.”

This case study identifies the key point at which the recognition of nondual awareness meets the therapeutic alliance and a client's presented problem: the denial of this wholeness as the genesis of suffering. This finding is corroborated by my experience of working with counseling students who are integrating nonduality into a marriage of personal and professional self-awareness. This therapeutic alliance both contains and transcends Rogers' (1967) notion of unconditional positive regard because mental health is based on the authenticity of consciousness, which, in Joanie's words, is about

...allowing a counselor's essence and ability to establish rapport to flow from where they are, not toward a project or becoming. That was really freeing for me, just to have that authenticity of where I was at, and I think I thought I was at a different place than where I was at.

In a counseling session, nondual wisdom reveals a healing quality that is an aspect of consciousness itself. As such, mental health is seen not as a state or objective to be obtained, but a prior condition of wholeness to be explored and remembered. In this light, nondual awareness unites clinician and client through a common ground of being, removing the stress and necessity of creating a therapeutic relationship (Leighton, 2010).

### ***Fluency in nondual language***

To be fluent in a language is to have mastered every level from grammar to syntax and from inflection to expression. This interview brought to the surface two sources of reflection, or signposts, from which counseling students like Joanie can base their matriculation in nondual language. The first is the ability to take the concepts and experiences of nondual awareness and make them their own. For Joanie, this process manifests in a therapeutic framework with three primary centers—mind, heart, and gut—from which to track nonduality through the course of treatment. Instead of looking through one lens of her curriculum, Joanie conceived that all three were endemic to her style:

We [counseling students] should be encouraged to go with the one [center we]... connect with the most, to have the classes be guided by that, to have labs be guided by that. So you'd want more heart and gut in labs first, I think, if we're going by experiential, and then maybe in the later labs, you could throw in more of the mind stuff.

This model is evidence that students are capable of not only balancing the realities of therapist and client personalities within the wholeness of the transcendent, but also doing so through their own experience. Joanie explained the gut as being the instinctive center, the heart as the feeling-based connection, and the mind as cognition. These three centers of nondual connectivity have corresponding counseling modalities. For the gut, we have existentialism; for the heart, we have emotionally based therapies; and for the mind, we have cognitive behavioral therapy. Joanie's model was effective for her because these three centers are the points at which she is most attuned to the status of a client's self. Additionally, the gut, heart, and mind can plug into any existing nondual framework, such as the ones put forward by Wilber (1980) or Almaas (2004).



The second signpost of nondual fluency for a counseling student that this interview revealed is a reconciliation of the nondual in one's personal and professional identity. For Joanie, this was expressed in a demarcation between how she lives the nondual and how she practices it clinically, as evidenced in the following exchange:

Trent: Okay. Would you say then that [the three primary centers] might be one of your biggest interventions, if you will? Using the nondual is helping to guide a client towards more access to gut, mind, and heart centers.

Joanie: I'll often say I'm a nondual when it comes to my personal journey, and I'm transpersonal when it comes to my counseling journey, because most clients—like, you can bring yourself in, right? There's a bit of nondual when you're counseling because that's part of you, but a lot of it is transpersonal, just because we're addressing different techniques.

T: That's a beautiful distinction, yeah. Say that again. You're trans—

J: I'm nondual when it comes to my personal journey, and I'm transpersonal when it comes to my counseling.

Within the process of nondual recognition through practice and gaining fluency, Joanie has provided an important caveat for any instructors working with nondual wisdom in a counseling curriculum. Thus, the two following primary experiences emerge: the amplification of personal patterns and symptoms, as well as the requirement that nondual wisdom is integrated with a student's developmental needs. When I questioned Joanie about the nondual turning her inward and magnifying her proclivities, she replied, "Yeah, that's a good way to put it. It just made everything so much bigger, including the pain I was feeling around my addiction."

The amplification of mental health and addiction issues that nondual language influences also reveals the importance of any counseling program that simultaneously attends to the transformational ramifications of nondual consciousness in the light of a student's basic developmental needs. There is a shift in understanding from extrinsic meaning to intrinsic development. The following excerpt from Joanie's interview illustrates how she managed initially to take nondual teachings and practices as abstractions and to connect them directly and intimately with her psychological development:

I started to lose meaning, but it wasn't in an embodied way. I was attempting to address the basics of daily life that I had been using the nondual to bypass. And then, I would get these existential nondual ideas and thoughts. I got really trapped, because for my development, I needed to grow, but I wasn't getting it. So I got stunted in my addiction and had to take a step back from the nondual.

Joanie's experience of self-awareness in her counseling program was an issue of finding a balance between autonomy and connectedness, between personal perspective and oneness. "[Self-awareness] begins to explore the hard question of the relationship between individual perspective and fundamental unity" (Blackstone, 2006, p. 26). I would

contend that the style of nonduality offered to counseling students needs to be built upon a symmetry of support and guidance from faculty while simultaneously encouraging the healthy autonomy and critical thinking that Keller (1985) notes as being indispensable variables in students' maturation as therapists.

### ***Curricular domains that support nondual literacy in a counseling curriculum***

#### **Students as co-researchers**

When I approached Joanie about the interview, one of the first things she disclosed was an equation: the greater the inclusion of her experience in a variety of capacities (coauthoring articles, assisting with teaching, facilitating counseling groups in the lab), the more effectively she could apply nondual language and awareness into her own method and style of counseling:

They [different domains] eventually all have to connect for it [nondual awareness] to be fully integrated, the heart, mind, and gut... I facilitated a family lab, and that... was much different, because I could understand what my gut was saying compared to what my head was saying, and also what my heart was saying.

Thus, students who gain nondual literacy in their counseling program are capable of holding and sitting with dark emotions and existential pain, which are two of the requisites for professional maturation. "You need to feel the pain of what you're holding onto, and let that just run its course" (Joanie). As co-researchers, students can experience multiple interactions between the precariousness of their existential situation and their counseling skillsets, such as empathy and complex listening.

#### **Communication**

Joanie shared the fact that the communication and recognition of the nondual in her program emerged in her relationships with her professors, who were predictably shaped by the personalities and proclivities of their program faculty's understandings, beliefs, and culture. Whether it is Buddhism, Advaita, or the metaphysics of Kant, nonduality recognizes and accentuates conventional counseling dialects that Ivey, Ivey, and Zalaquett (2010) emphasized when they said, "Two major client's styles of communication – concrete and abstract – are important for the counselor to observe and to be prepared for in conversation" (p. 135). More than anything, nonduality challenges the assumption that saying something is equivalent to carrying out an action. Speaking can be in service of silence, inaction, simply being okay with what arises, or allowing the impulse of authorship to pass. The interview also brought up the trap of nondual clichés, such as "just this," "let go," and "surrender into existence." Being aware of how these sayings can become cul de sacs of avoidance is important, not only to cultivate a language of oneness but also to avoid psychological platitudes that permeate the language of counseling programs.

#### **Ethics**

Ethics is one of the greatest areas of a counseling program to which nonduality can contribute. As Joanie noted, "Being an ethical counselor is much more than adherence to principles – it is the embodiment of humility. I think we need to constantly be humbled as therapists. . . . To go to counseling yourself I think is humbling." As an ethical

companion in a program, a nondual worldview completely embraces a student's feelings, attitudes, and beliefs with the basics of safety, trust, and unconditional positive regard. At the same time, it expands ethical instruction to include what Aldous Huxley (1945/1992, p. 35) referred to as the "ground of being", or, in other words, the undivided and common source of the sentience that every human shares. This implies that students are not only doing their best to ethically support their clients through fidelity to professional codes of conduct, but as Eppert, Vokey, Nguyen, and Bai (2015) noted, they are also exercising fidelity to a collective source of vitality and health:

There are ethical as well as ontological resonances among these Eastern wisdom traditions. The purpose of teaching ethics and moral regulations in nondualistic worldviews is typically to help human beings individually and collectively align their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and actions with the primordial ground of creative existence. (p. 276)

### **Practice**

Nondual awareness takes practice, a reality that Joanie emphasized during the interview. Yet nondual practice is not directed toward any outcome, nor does it have stages or grades to track its development. Counseling curricula, on the other hand, are goal oriented by their very nature, with students displaying greater and greater mastery of skillsets and theory. This difference is perhaps the starkest area of divergence between counseling curricula and nondual wisdom. As Joanie pointed out, in her experience, merging both types of learning curves can be a challenge. "They [instructors] do try and push that – our self-work. But when you push some of that self-work in the labs and people only have a conceptual idea for it, it can be hard."

During the interview, Joanie stated that the only way to measure the effectiveness of nonduality in a counseling program is experientially, when the skillsets are executed in the classroom. An example would be assessments. In a conventional program, students are trained to identify, capture, and clinically translate information into a treatment plan addressing various situations and conditions. In contrast, nondual awareness would guide a student toward a psychology that recognizes both the historical and contemporary narratives of the separate self as fictional.

Addressing the apparent impasse, Joanie beautifully articulated the ebb and flow in a student's experience of nondual in the assessment process in the following exchange:

T: Can you think of an intervention, let's say an assessment. I don't know what assessments you've done – PHQ9, or Becks, whatever, or just your own assessment. You're assessing somebody. How might the nondual inform, maybe not in assessment per se, but maybe some intervention you do with somebody? That could be anything.

J: I think with the nondual, like the courage to just do something with someone, or be vulnerable with someone... just trying new things and not getting attached to the outcome. I feel like that really informs that piece.... Or like instead of getting caught up in, "I'll do the intake assessments," and instead of getting caught up in finishing that in the first section, we can use three sessions to do it, because we're just going

with what's coming up. I feel like the nondual informs that. It's not like, "I have this task and we must follow this task." Nondual allows freedom to just be with what's there, and not to try and bring up anything different or put things away, but, "Okay, so this is here, so let's just do that."

T: It's more of an organic sort of allowing the moment to point out whatever, like diagnostically, if there's depression, for example.... This is just my own [idea], from what you're saying, but the nondual would say, "Maybe to allow that depression to inform in whatever's coming up," so instead of saying, "You have severe depression on this and this scale," that will come up naturally when you're able to hold that.

J: Yeah, I feel like it can also... You could have depression on a scale and have it come up naturally. But also, the nondual really points out to what's actually there, and sometimes assessments can't do that, or they over-do that. And I find that a lot, so I'm really liberal and just medication last option, diagnosis last option. Let's try and do this as much as we can, and if not, okay, we'll consider you doing that. I think it points out what's really going on, and it's like, "Oh, you don't have depression. You have severe trauma." Are those the same thing? I don't know... but at least we're getting to the root of something. So it's just bringing everything to the now, so the past, and present, and the future are here, and so when we look at depression from a nondual place, we look at every piece of it.... We don't look at the assessment, we don't look at presenting symptoms. We look at everything that has informed your depression, everything. That allows so many different things than just going by this guide of what depression is and what could cause it and all that stuff.

At the curricular level of therapeutic language, Joanie is demonstrating the importance of information, but in a nondual way; that is, by allowing the content and the process of an assessment to speak for itself, uninhibited by strategies and optimal outcomes. Most important, there is the issue of pace that practicing nondual language reveals and promotes. Joanie added that for her, the cadence and capacity to stop when the assessment material asks for it is the greatest allowance a program must make.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

### ***Foster student–professor relationships***

As the data from this study demonstrate, student relationships with professors and their unique reception of nonduality may be the lynchpin of their experience of a clinically salient nondual language. "The flow of force between student and teacher is a conscious exchange helping both evolve" (Rudi, 1973, p. 40). This relational force or transmission can steer a counseling student's application of nondual literacy toward best practices, as was found in this case study. What is more, when a student can use the mentoring relationship with an instructor as a venue for probing into the teachings and practices of nondual wisdom, and then apply that knowledge to counseling, the student is capable of taking the crucial step from the conceptual to the experiential. This is predicated on the faculty's willingness to share their encounters with nonduality both personally and professionally. In the case of this study, every meaningful engagement with the nondual that Joanie made was in the context of one of her relationships with a professor in the Addictions Counselling Program, supporting the importance of faculty being encouraged

to educate themselves on the value of nondual awareness.

***Provide linguistic reference points***

Toward maximizing a student's experience of nondual wisdom in a counseling curriculum, I would argue that any style of and emphasis on nondual literacy, from the emotionally cathartic to the philosophical, must be recognized under some umbrella of a core counseling curriculum, based on the understanding that human language is imperfect in its ability to represent the transcendent reality (Searle, 1980). One of the themes that emerged in my case study was the phenomenon of students being given nondual concepts prematurely and haphazardly, before a linguistic reference point could be created. Joanie stated, "There was a significant gap between conceptual and experiential nonduality.... If I was given a concept prematurely, there was nothing to remember. There was no experience to connect to." This inconsistency could be mitigated through explicit, standardized consistency, monitored through core competencies embedded in the structure of a curriculum.

The easiest bridge into these recognized standards of regulatory bodies, such as the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2009), would be spirituality and religion (Hage, 2006). Nondual traditions share a common genesis of religious and spiritual languages, including Advaita Vedanta of Hinduism, Mahayana of Buddhism, Christian mysticism, and Taoism, to name a few. Most important, these spiritual and religious nondual teachings originate from every corner of the world, cross a multitude of cultures, and, in the process, address the call for diversity by internationalizing counseling practices and training programs (Marsella & Pedersen, 2004). Embedding these features in a counseling curriculum would foster a counseling student's experience of nonduality by drawing on the connections that clinicians already address, such as education, socioeconomic factors, familial constructs, and judicial practices.

***Adapt measurements to include nonduality***

Many of the religious and spiritual counseling competencies being developed are based on the goal of avoiding reductionism (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009), a process that closely mirrors a nondual view of self. Hood et al. (2009) noted that "one way to avoid reductionism is to treat the individual as a holistic entity, instead of the typical psychological research approach of fractionating the individual into traits, attitudes, beliefs, values, habits, responses and underlying physiology" (p. 25). With this philosophy of holism in place, a counseling faculty could use existing metrics, such as Fowler's (1995) model of religious and spiritual development or Genia's (1997) spirituality and transcendence index, to provide a much-needed picture of how their students are assimilating and connecting the nondual with what is personally and professionally important in their lives.

Various transcendent facets of a student's emerging awareness of an undivided consciousness could be captured through questionnaires, which could be molded specifically for that student's experience of nonduality. Examples include questions such as "I often feel a larger presence when I am counseling," "I find that I am not as attached to outcomes and being right," and "I find that I am equally aware of the quality of the present moment in a session as well as the content of what is transpiring." Such measurements could help to provide a counseling training program with tangible

feedback regarding the therapeutic impact nondual awareness is having on students.

### ***Use students as co-researchers***

My interview data suggest that introducing the nondual into curricular programming and pairing it with clinical outcomes is all for naught if students are not enlisted throughout their programs as co-researchers. Nonduality is a definitive community of like-minded people assimilating and practicing teachings from traditional communities. It is vital that students are aware of the diversity of communality in nonduality and are provided access points from which to enrich their experience as co-researchers. For example, with the growing support of science, a student as a therapeutic companion (Barash, 2014) could use the communal language of Buddhism to help a client see that “Dukka” (Loy, 2000), or suffering, is directly related to the refutation of one’s connectedness with life systems. Concurrently, Satir’s (1976) systems therapy could aid a counseling student’s experience of nonduality by providing a more intimate look at family dynamics. Taken together, both address the requirements of an authentic system of transcendence as well as a genuine system of engagement with the personality.

Another example of a nondual student co-researcher can be found in the context of critical thinking and rhetoric. Nondual languages provide vital services that students could incorporate into their training program as well as implementing them in their professional careers. One such element of counseling programs that often gets overlooked is “the turmoil that students feel when their values are challenged [which] is directly tied to their fear of annihilation, of death” (Berthel, 1994, p. 1). Nondual wisdom begins with the existential fear of annihilation and equates suffering with the avoidance of this fact.

Based on data from this case study, creating viable tools for measuring the impact nonduality can have on the quality of a student’s counseling education is predicated on two variables: inclusion into specialty competencies and greater use of students as research participants. For these goals to be met, a fundamental fallacy must first be addressed, which is the myth of the student as an educational consumer. Taylor and Wilding (2009) noted that students who internalize this myth are prone to passivity and diminished participation in their learning. This tendency was echoed by McCulloch (2009), who noted, “The student’s role in the production of learning is de-emphasized and thus learning itself may be diminished. . . . Students who have internalized the metaphor tend to act in a passive manner” (p. 173).

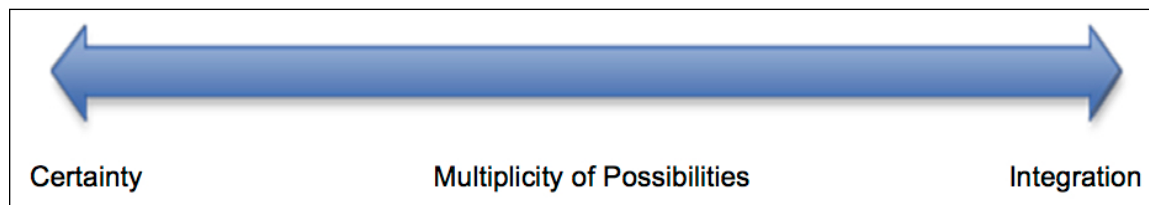
As the results of the case study interview demonstrate, it is impossible for a student to passively consume nonduality precisely because it is predicated upon an active tracking of one’s true nature in relationship with the whole. “Even an individual’s feeling of being a separate, isolated, bounded self is a mere substitute for one’s own true nature, a substitute for the transcendent Self of the ultimate whole” (Wilber, 1980, p. 103). For counseling programs incorporating some degree of nonduality, a student’s experience must extend parity not only to the content of skills and treatment plans, but also to the space of wholeness from which they emerge.

### ***From certainty to integration***

Explaining nondual language in a counseling program presents a tremendous opportunity for faculty and students to open themselves to important and rewarding new

understandings about the inherent potential of the counseling process, moving from certainty to suspicion to integration, as shown in Figure 1

**Figure 1. Potential movement in the counseling process from certainty to integration**



The nondual spectrum of languages as applied to counseling students can be explained through the analogy of a simple sentence: "I am counseling John who has depression." A student could read this sentence in a literal manner, highlighted by factual dualisms separating "I," "John," and "depression." From this pole of certainty, students are working with a model in which a separate counsellor and a separate client are exchanging separate therapeutic theories and practices. The primary feature of the vernacular of certainty is the burden a student assumes to heal and the burden the client adopts to be healed. This language of literal materialism is necessary for a counseling student to avoid the trap of spiritually bypassing levels of growth and development toward an interpretation of "I am counseling John who has depression" that is interconnected, fluid, and dynamic. A student at the certainty language of nonduality might say something along the lines of, "I am struggling to show John why he might be depressed but it doesn't seem to get through," or "John is reporting an improvement in his depression, but I am beginning to doubt if it is depression after all."

Progressing along the path of nondual languages utilized in a counseling curriculum, a student confronts the dialect that opens to a multitude of possibilities. Here, the previous literal beliefs separating "I" from "John" and "depression" begin to buckle under the weight of what French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1965) referred to as the school of suspicion based upon a curriculum of critiquing false consciousness. In counseling labs, courses, and practicums, students learn that any therapeutic model, from cognitive behavioral to existential, has a compliance of healing that exposes the question of being. "In existential phenomenology the existence in question may be one's own or that of another... The false self arises in compliance with the intentions or expectations of others" (Laing, 1960, pp. 25). A student immersed in nondual multiplicity might begin to say, "I am aware of some presence larger than myself when I am counseling John," or "There are moments that I feel deeply relaxed and connected with John and the urgency to fix the depression seems to fade into the background."

Finally, there is the nondual language of integration, in which a counseling student develops a double-consciousness that fully understands the necessity of dualisms separating the "I" from "John" and "depression" while simultaneously seeing through the literal chain of self in counseling. Detachment is the primary experience of integration for students who begin to exercise the capacity to counsel from a fundamental consciousness that is innately interdependent and therapeutic. "Nondual wisdom refers to the understanding and direct experience of a fundamental consciousness that underlies the apparent distinction between perceiver and perceived. From the nondual perspective, the split between self and other is a purely mental construct" (Prendergast, 2003, p. 2). The highlight of this language for

counseling students is a freedom that comes from seeing how permeable and fluid interpersonal boundaries are that “touch the core of a client’s contraction even as we retain a sense of spacious detachment” (Prendergast, 2003, p. 8). A student at the point of integration might say, “While I am providing John with practical tools to address his depression, I am doing so with the understanding that nondual awareness provides everything John needs simply by being conscious.” Another statement directed toward the client at the integration point of nondual language might be, “You don’t have to fight depression because the unconditioned awareness supporting this moment is free of the need to be ill or healthy.”

Let me offer another student counseling example to illustrate some of what I am discussing. In one counseling lab, I was working with a class on the importance of the Buddhist concept of emptiness. My teaching attempts were based on my many years of exposure to Buddhist teachings and the relationship between grasping expectations and suffering. The further along the spectrum of nondual language I went, the more confused and disoriented the students became. One student proclaimed that emptiness was life negating and pointed out that addicts are empty by virtue of their disease. The students were repeatedly attempting to translate the suspicion of emptiness with the certainty of basic counseling theories such as those of Corey (2009), Ivey et al. (2010), and Yalom (2011).

Shifting course, I retracted my efforts and recast emptiness within the context of counseling languages, using the example of Carl Jung’s (1964) concept of archetypes. Just as the archetypes are empty of permanence and full of potential, students began to see that emptiness does not imply the absence of anything but rather contains the full potential of whatever is arising in the present moment. Toward the end of the lecture, students demonstrated the capacity to identify points of nondual emptiness exemplified in their textbooks (Pearlman & Saavkvitne, 1995; Rector & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011). This example not only demonstrates that counseling students can hold nondual and therapeutic languages interchangeably, but it also reveals that counseling programs do not need to rearrange or renovate their curriculum to accommodate nondual teachings and practices.

### ***Limitations of the case study method***

Considering the hypothesis and recommendations in this paper, it should be stated that many researchers are critical of the case study for not providing the basics of the scientific method, such as validity, reliability, and applicability to larger populations. Campbell (1975) and Flyvbjerg (2006) also note the difficulties in developing full-fledged research models from a case study. Nevertheless, balanced perspectives have been emerging out of the case study format. Researchers such as Walton (1992), Stake (1995) and Christensen (1987) have turned the shortcomings of the case study in new directions by challenging conventional wisdom. They point out a set of foundational misunderstandings, or biases in research, that focuses on larger numbers of subjects. These include the assumptions that knowledge is more important than context, lack of generalizability equates to no scientific contribution, and case studies are good only for only creating initial hypotheses at the start of research.

While this case study has, no doubt, fallen into the criteria of each of these misunderstandings, it also is redeemed, in my estimation, in the essence captured by Hans Eysenck (1976), perhaps the greatest critic of case studies, who felt their value was nothing more than a means of producing anecdotes. After a well-documented critique of the case study, Eysenck eventually changed his mind, stating, “Sometimes we simply have to keep



our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something” (1976, p. 9). This presentation of nonduality as a therapeutic component in a counseling program offers a variety of transformative possibilities, based not on the burden of providing something, such as new cognitive information, but rather on the intention that the context-dependent knowledge and experience at the heart of a counseling training program will be captured in the case study as the phenomenology of authentic learning.

## **Conclusion**

This case study has supported the hypothesis that for nonduality to be an effective complement in therapy, and for students to have meaningful experiences, a counseling curriculum must make some unique allowances. A counseling department does not need to hire additional staff or procure more funds to have a program that is literate in nondual wisdom. The standardized curriculum can incorporate nonduality effectively for students by emphasizing the professors’ personalities and experiences of nondual wisdom. The program design needs to take into consideration the proclivities of each instructor and how they shape and guide the educational process.

For this transformation to take place, program faculty must present nonduality to students consistently, explicitly, and no differently than any other counseling theory. Specifically, this includes connecting the unity of subject and object with creative and imaginative tools used in the counseling office (Leighton, 2014b). Assumptions cannot be made stating that some instructors are nondual and others are not. Varying levels of interest and involvement in nondual communities can be accommodated at any level if students are allowed to explore and experiment with nonduality, just as they would with any other clinical variable. Finally, any expression of the nondual must be relational in order to fortify a student’s understanding of the therapeutic alliance. My experience is that programs can offer students all the concepts in the world (emptiness, oneness, awareness, and the like), but if they are not directed toward strengthening a student’s capacity to develop a safe and trusting space with a client or an instructor, then nonduality may become narcissistic and antagonistic to the healing process.

An example of this unfolded when a graduate student created a thesis based on the argument that nondual traditions should be incorporated into counseling psychology at the very expense of Maslow’s (1962) hierarchy of needs. In doing so the student not only bypassed the basic psychological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization requirements for basic mental health, he used the nondual to ignore the crucial point that people often come to counseling because their hierarchy of needs is inaccessible to their conscious awareness: “If we wish to help humans to become more fully human, we must realize not only that they try to realize themselves, but that they are also reluctant or afraid or unable to do so” (Maslow, 1962, p. 45). This myopia isolated this student from his student cohort because they would not listen and take into account how other students were approaching case studies. Because the student refused to entertain other perspectives besides nonduality, he was forced to take the content of the curriculum and peer feedback in a guarded way to defend his position. Most importantly, it also created a situation in which the academic focus of openness and dialogue became mandated by the student’s belief system that mental health is synonymous with the nondual state of enlightenment (Carse, 2006). Seeing the detriment that nonduality was having on this student’s thesis development and diminishing collegiality with other students, a professor who had invested many years in studying nondual mysticism in the Hindu tradition took this student under her wing. In doing

so, she created a reality in which mentorship (rather than personal effort) became this student's contact with oneness. As a result, the student changed his thesis topic to the value nonduality can have in creating professional referrals, . This came about when the faculty member challenged the student to find as many nondual qualities as possible for each class, including conversations with peers. In this light, the student began to see that if the nondual is what it proclaims to be, then mental health and counselor competencies are available in any moment and through any perspective. As a result, he. was able to graduate from the program with many close friends among students and faculty and with a working understanding of wholeness not limited to his own attainment.

Wellwood (2003) described the ideal relational experience of nonduality that is possible when students are allowed to assume the role of co-researchers and co-creators in their engagement with alternative frameworks of the self. He said, "This will require a capacity to marry nondual realization – which dissolves fixation of the separate self" (Wellwood, 2003, p. 141). I believe that this case study has provided a helpful starting point from which to explore a student's experience of ancient wisdom in counseling training. Clearly, much remains to be done to ensure that nondual literacy is as tangible a tool as anything a student would take from the curriculum.

I sincerely hope that I have clarified some of the values and benefits of using nondual teachings and practices in a counseling program. This case study has attempted to demonstrate that future counsellors can utilize the pragmatic structure of their training as a means of deepening the marriage between personal self-awareness and professional efficacy as a clinician. Finally, I would emphasize my advocacy for the case study as a valuable contribution for understanding and appreciating many of the deeper levels of counseling education and practice.

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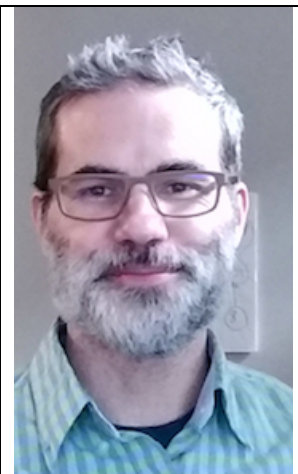
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