

ARTICLES

Core Values of the Australian Counselling and Psychotherapy Profession: Practitioner Perspectives

Nathan Beel^a, Elisa Agostinelli^b, Cathy Bettman^c, Christine Chinchin^d, Lottie Harris^e

Keywords: counselling profession, professional identity, core values, Australia

<https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.157553>

Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia

Vol. 14, Issue 1, 2026

This study explored the core values held by members of the Australian counselling and psychotherapy profession. Between March and June 2024, we surveyed registered practitioners to identify common values that underpin practitioners' professional identity and differentiate them from members of other helping professions. Three key themes emerged from the data: prioritisation of the client, prioritisation of the therapist–client relationship, and professionalism, which includes a commitment to both professional and personal development. These findings highlight the humanistic values central to the profession. Our article concludes by recommending the development of a unified set of core values to enhance the profession's identity and recognition.

The counselling profession has wrestled with the notion of professional identity in Australia (O'Hara, 2023) and internationally (Granello & Gunawan, 2023; Harrison, 2023; Hsi & Boman, 2022; Spurgeon, 2012). In Australia, it has historically struggled with confusion internally, and

^a Nathan Beel (PhD, MCoun) is a registered counsellor and clinical supervisor with the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA). He is a senior lecturer in the School of Psychology and Wellbeing, University of Southern Queensland, and a sessional educator with the Australian College of Applied Professions. Nathan has publications on counsellor education, the counselling profession, telehealth, and male-friendly counselling. He can be contacted at Nathan.Beel@UniSQ.edu.au

^b Elisa Agostinelli is a senior lecturer and program director in counselling at in the School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University. She is also an adjunct at the University of Southern Queensland. She obtained her PhD in counselling education and supervision from the University of Toledo, Ohio. Her research focuses on supervision, counsellor education, trauma, and domestic and family violence.

^c Associate Professor Cathy Bettman is currently acting dean of Metavision Institute. She has lectured and practised counselling in diverse contexts for over 20 years. She supervises students, interns, and practitioners in clinical and research settings. For her PhD, Cathy conducted a qualitative research study in domestic violence. Her thesis was entitled "Patriarchy: The Predominant Discourse and Font of Domestic Violence". This study resulted in her achieving a reputation as a feminist researcher although she prefers her philosophical stance to be understood as more inclusive. Having been trained in humanistic and systemic frameworks, she embraces social constructivist, constructionist, and dialogical paradigms. Her qualifications also include Master of Science (Psychotherapy), Master of Couple and Family Therapy, and Master of Counselling.

^d Christine Chinchin (PhD, MEd) has been involved in counselling education since the 1990s. This has been both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Christine's PhD focused on learning in tertiary education, and she proposed that counselling is a specific form of learning. Her lengthy experience provides a unique historical perspective of the issues faced by counselling educators and the profession within Australia.

^e Lottie Harris is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Child Protection Studies (Australian Catholic University), undertaking her studies as part of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study. Lottie's research focus is on the mental health impacts of child multi-type maltreatment, and the subsequent best-practice assessments and interventions for children and young people in Australian out-of-home care. This research is expanding on Lottie's professional experience in child welfare, which includes policy, research, and direct practice in the homelessness and out-of-home care sectors within New South Wales non-government organisations.

externally, and still lacks a definitive professional identity (Moir-Bussy et al., 2016). Reasons for this include challenges separating its identity from other professions that counsel (Gale & Austin, 2003), other professionals self-identifying as counsellors (Lincicome, 2015), the number and diversity of counselling associations (Schofield, 2008), varying counselling modalities (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021), and multiple professional identities (such as counsellors and psychotherapists) (Beel, 2024). Combined, these have a fragmenting and confusing effect (Moir-Bussy et al., 2016).

While the profession has made considerable progress in professionalising (Beel, 2024), it still lacks clarity in this regard. The identities of counsellor and psychotherapist have produced rivalry and conflict within the profession, as well as confusion about what each identity stands for (O'Hara, 2023). This article uses the terms *counselling* and *counsellor* inclusively to refer to both identities (cf. Beel, 2024).

Another source of confusion is that the lack of protection of the title of counsellor means that any person from any profession (and any person lacking a relevant occupational background) can self-identify and practise as a counsellor in Australia. Membership in the counselling profession is voluntary, and the profession does not have any legal claims or protections in its central area of expertise or titles (O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015). This leads to perceptions that the expertise and hence trustworthiness of those claiming to be counsellors are potentially quite variable and unpredictable (House of Representatives Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, 2021; Storey & McGarry, 2022).

Professional Counsellor Identity

Numerous attempts have been made to define what constitutes a counselling professional identity in the knowledge that clarity will help inform individuals and the profession and can strengthen identity. Woo et al. (2014) extensively reviewed existing literature that attempted to define the counselling profession's identity. The authors listed six components that make up a counsellor's identity: counsellors have sound knowledge of the counselling profession, understand its philosophy, are familiar with the roles and required expertise of counsellors, hold positive attitudes towards the profession and themselves as counsellors, engage in behaviours expected of counsellors (e.g., professional development, clinical supervision), and engage with other professionals. Woo et al. (2014) found that common across the literature defining the counselling profession's identity was the importance of recognising the counselling identity as distinct from that of other cognate professions.

Weinrach et al. (2001) offered a more concise and focused definition of a counsellor's professional identity, highlighting that it "is the possession of a core set of values, beliefs, and assumptions about the unique characteristics of one's selected profession that differentiates it from other professions" (p. 168). This definition points to a common foundation of values and assumptions and acknowledges that these same values constitute the unique

identity of the counselling profession. The current study uses the term *core values* as a label to describe fundamental beliefs, concepts, philosophies, and principles that guide counsellors' behaviour, shape the therapeutic practice, and inform ethical decision-making. Such values are core in that they are central and distinguishing at the level of the profession.

Perron et al. (2023) suggested that “counseling values are defined as the common principles, standards, and policies that guide ethical practices and assumptions within the counseling profession” (p. 331). The shared, agreed, and understood values help counsellors to know who they are professionally and ensure that they can articulate this knowledge and clearly understand how counsellors differ from members of similar professions (Puglia, 2008; Remley & Herlihy, 2025). Day (2015) argued for the importance of a clearly defined and articulated disciplinary base for counselling and psychotherapy, lest they be subsumed and co-opted as a subdiscipline into the medical model that dominates the Australian mental health system. The ability to recognise and articulate the distinct and defining philosophy of the profession of counselling is important not only for individual counsellors but also for the profession when lobbying and advocating for wider recognition and public awareness. This includes counsellors' participation in relevant debates and benefits, such as Medicare inclusion.

In Australia, a critical core value that psychologists prioritise as a profession is the *scientist-practitioner* model (Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, 2019; Johnson & Kaslow, 2014). In comparison, the model followed by social workers could be summarised as that of *social justice* (cf. Australian Association of Social Workers, 2024). These encapsulate a distinguishing emphasis that sets each profession apart from other professions, even though other professions may also value these points (but not as their main distinguishing feature). O'Hara and O'Hara (2015) suggested that the term *reflective practitioner* best represents counsellors; however, it is unclear how widely this view is shared by the Australian profession more broadly.

A Need for Consolidated Core Australian Counselling Values

An understanding of the counselling profession's values is a key component of counsellor identity (Dollarhide et al., 2023; Granello & Gunawan, 2023). Values provide individuals with a sense of connection with the profession and are recognisable across settings of practice (Mrdjenovich & Moore, 2004). Further, these values can resonate with one's individual professional and personal values (Woo et al., 2014). The profession's values should pervade and flavour the counsellor's work so that, although counsellors might use modalities shared by other professions, they will deliver them in a manner aligned with the counselling profession's distinctive values (Burns & Cruikshanks, 2017). Counselling training is expected to instil the profession's core values into students as an integral part of their professional development (Choate et al., 2005); thus, it is important that these values

are clearly defined and consistently communicated. At a broader level, the counselling profession's distinctive values are critical to emphasise when advocating for the profession (Moorhead et al., 2023).

Despite the importance of a clear value base, no known authoritative sources consolidate the core values of the Australian counselling profession more broadly. The Australian Register of Counsellors and Psychotherapists' website (<https://www.arcapregister.com.au/>), owned jointly by the Australian Counselling Association (ACA) and the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) to provide listings of practising members of both associations, does not provide any information related to the distinctive values of the counselling profession. While a range of values can be identified in various primary documents of each peak body, such as its code of ethics (ACA, 2022; PACFA, 2017), scope of practice (ACA, 2020; PACFA, 2018), and training accreditation guidelines (ACA, 2012; PACFA, 2025a, 2025b), several of which overlap between both peak bodies (e.g. client centredness), currently there is no known shared agreement across both peak bodies about what the core values of the profession are or should be.

A study conducted in the United States sought to understand how practising counsellors defined the counselling profession and delineated it from cognate professions (Mellin et al., 2011). Surveys were completed by 238 counsellors. The data suggested that the counselling profession could be defined by its counselling-related tasks and the services that counsellors provide, by the graduate counselling training, and by its wellness and developmental focus (contrasted with a pathology-oriented, medical model focus). Counsellors differentiated the profession of counselling from social work by indicating counsellors do not undertake case management, are not as systemic or globally focused, and do not have a primarily administrative function. Likewise, compared with psychologists, counsellors stated they do not focus as much on testing, research, or diagnosis. Rather, counsellors distinguished themselves as having more of a wellness, empowerment, and personal growth emphasis. A minority of responses indicated there were no differences between counselling, psychology, and social work. This study focused on eliciting the views of rank-and-file counsellors (cf. Mellin et al., 2011) in contrast to scholarship where the views represented scholars and leaders in the counselling profession (cf. Beel et al., 2025; O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015).

Both Australian peak bodies offer a range of documentation that elucidate their values both explicitly and implicitly. Students training for entry to the profession are taught from a range of modalities and educators, each with their own underpinning values that informs practice. To date, there has been no attempt to identify what values might be transcendent across the profession. Thus, surveying the grassroots membership may assist to identify what members believe are the values of the profession more broadly. In turn, this might illuminate how well these values align with the profession's own documentation and provide greater clarity, confidence, and articulation to

normative values held by professional association members. Accordingly, this study asked practising members of PACFA and ACA what they believe are the core values of the counselling profession.

Method

Research Design

This exploratory study aimed to identify the core values shared among practitioners in the counselling profession to articulate the fundamental identity of the profession and the points of differentiation from other cognate professions. Therefore, a cross-sectional study was undertaken of registered practitioners (e.g., counsellors, psychotherapists) to gain insights into their perspectives on the key features of their profession. This cross-sectional design had several benefits. First, it allowed the researchers a time- and resource-efficient method for gathering a diverse range of views from a broad sample. This approach enabled the development of a more comprehensive snapshot of the current prevailing beliefs and attitudes held by professionals within the sector, leading to the identification of patterns in collective values. Ultimately, this study aimed to provide practitioner-informed evidence that may inform more unified, effective, and cohesive professional standards.

Researcher Descriptions

The research team comprised long-term members of the counselling profession, and a research assistant from the psychology discipline.

Participants

Prospective participants were required to be registered practising members of ACA and/or PACFA and over the age of 18. To maintain participant anonymity and investigate values across the broader profession, the research team opted not to require identifying membership details or association affiliation during the survey process.

Data Collection

A short questionnaire was hosted on the University of Southern Queensland's Lime Survey tool, an online platform accessible via handheld devices and desktop computers. The survey included open and closed questions covering demographic information, aspects of counselling practice, and counsellors' perspectives on the values of their profession. The survey questions were developed by the research team.

A type of alternative-form reliability was applied within the survey, whereby several questions were functionally equivalent but worded differently to ensure consistency in responses (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2018). The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete and required participants to provide written responses, which could be as long and in-depth as they felt necessary. Because the survey was hosted online, participants were able to complete the survey at a time that was most convenient to them, thereby reducing participant burden.

Recruitment

To maximise sample size and diversity, several channels were used simultaneously for recruitment to this study. Direct email invitations were sent out via professional networks and contact lists of the researchers, most of whom were long-standing members of the counselling profession and members of the professional counselling bodies. Advertisements of the study were hosted on both the ACA and PACFA websites, and multiple social media posts were placed across various platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn, and Reddit, with moderator permissions). No tangible incentives were offered to encourage participation; however, prospective participants were made aware that their responses might inform the development of future professional standards.

Sampling

A purposive sampling approach was employed as the primary sampling strategy. This specifically sought participants who had professional experience and knowledge of the counselling profession. In addition, a snowball sampling strategy was encouraged, whereby participants were asked to refer colleagues to participate. The survey was made available for completion between March 1 and June 30, 2024. All completed surveys were included in the final analysis.

Ethics

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: ETH2023-0600). The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained through questionnaire completion. Essential study information was provided across the recruitment material and, importantly, on the survey homepage, thereby supporting informed participation. Participants could exit the survey at any time. Only data from completed surveys were collected and used in the analysis.

Data Analysis

A mixed-methods analysis approach was applied to the survey data. First, basic descriptive statistics were reported on the demographic and values data to demonstrate trends in the participant cohort. For the qualitative data from the open-ended questions, an inductive thematic analysis approach was used, following the six-phase method described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with Phase 1: data familiarisation, during which Author 5 immersed herself in the data by reading all survey responses multiple times. For Phase 2: generating initial codes, the same author coded the entire dataset into NVivo software. Author 5 was chosen to conduct the initial analysis because she had limited knowledge of the counselling profession's discourses and theories, so could view the data from a more impartial perspective.

In Phases 3 and 4, which required searching for and developing themes, Authors 1, 2, and 5 collaboratively and iteratively reviewed the initial codes and their groupings to develop potential themes; then, they cross-referenced these against the coded extracts and the entire dataset. During this stage, the existing literature on professional identity and counselling values provided a conceptual lens that helped contextualise and interpret the emerging themes. In Phase 5, the team reached a consensus on the final thematic structure, defining and naming the themes and subthemes. Finally, to illuminate the prevalence of these themes within our sample, we quantified our findings. This involved tallying how many of the participants made statements that were coded within each final theme. These counts were converted into the numbers and percentages presented in [Table 1](#).

Findings

In total, 26 participants completed the full survey. The average length of years practising in the counselling profession was 9.7 (range was 1–30 years). Qualifications in the field varied, ranging from diploma level ($n = 5$, 19.2%) to PhD level ($n = 1$, 3.8%); the most common qualifications were Master of Counselling ($n = 9$, 34.6%) and Master of Psychotherapy ($n = 4$, 15.4%).

We identified three themes and seven subthemes in the data, as listed below in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Respondents Supporting Each Theme and Subtheme

Theme	N (26)	%
Prioritisation of the client	21	80.8
Supportive of client's capacity	18	69.2
Person-centred	17	65.4
Prioritisation of the therapist–client relationship	23	88.5
Collaborative	19	73.1
Therapeutic sensitivity	12	46.2
Professionalism	20	76.9
Commitment to professional development	12	46.2
Ethically committed	12	46.2
Commitment to personal development	14	53.8

Prioritisation of the Client

Over 80% of the participants identified that prioritisation of the client is a core principle that differentiates the counselling profession from other helping professions. This theme refers to the prioritisation of the clients' needs, goals, and wellbeing as the central focus of the therapeutic process. This value emphasises that the counsellors' actions and decisions are informed by the client's own interests and goals. Two aspects of this theme were evident in the responses from practising counsellors.

First, respect for and support of the client's capacity was a common subtheme referenced by almost 70% of participants. Participants described the importance of acknowledging, trusting in, and fostering the client's capacity, viewing the client as the expert in their own experiences with inherent strengths and resources to guide them in their journey. Central to this subtheme, honouring the client's right to make their own choices and control their own decisions demonstrates that clients are treated with respect and dignity, as the following participant comment captures: "Recognising that clients, with support, have the resources to self-actualise, a therapist is not an expert on a client's life and refrains from advising around and trying to fix the client's presentations".

The result of respecting the capacity of clients is that they feel empowered, which several participants identified as being a core value of the action of counselling, for example, "Counselling aims to empower clients by helping them recognise their strengths, resources, and potential for growth and change".

The second subtheme of client prioritisation concerned the person-centred approach. Most participants (65.4%) identified this approach as a core principle of the counselling profession. Key elements of this subtheme included being respectful and showing empathy, engaging in deep listening, and acceptance of clients without imposing personal or professional bias. The counsellor is expected to demonstrate unconditional positive regard through consistent warmth, respect, and a non-judgemental attitude. Fundamentally, the person-centred approach entails being fully present with the client and engaging with them authentically in their current psychological and emotional state, as observed by one participant: "Counsellors vary in their training and specialisation but the foundational skill of being skilled at 'being with' another person so that they feel 'seen and heard' means that they have advanced skills in helping a person with difficulties".

Being person-centred emphasises viewing the client in a holistic light. One respondent described a distinguishing feature of counselling compared with similar professions: "I would say that counsellors approach the client with a focus on the holistic lived experience of that person". This means not focusing on a diagnosis for treatment but rather being guided by the client's perspective. Working in this way encourages a flexible, individualised approach, working in the interests of the client. By prioritising the client, counsellors aim to build trusting, collaborative relationships that foster personal growth and healing in the client. This approach underscores the belief that each client has intrinsic worth and the capacity to change. The findings related to this theme suggest that a humanistic philosophical approach aligns best with the counselling profession since counsellors place high value on the client as the expert in the counselling process.

Prioritisation of the Client–Therapist Relationship

While the first theme focuses on how counsellors perceive their role with clients, the second theme describes the core principles foundational to the process in which counsellors assist their clients. A distinct aspect of counselling, as outlined by participants, was the emphasis on a safe, trusting, empathic relationship between counsellor and client. This relationship was considered a critical part of the intervention and enabled clients to feel comfortable and respected enough to engage in the therapeutic process. Over 70% of responses identified collaborative problem-solving as a key function of counselling, one that relies on a strong, honest relationship. Participants emphasised that a crucial aspect of this approach is the professional partnership between counsellor and client, which facilitates a shared method for identifying and addressing the presenting issues, for instance, “Meeting as human to human and working collaboratively, sharing power where possible, is key”.

The goal of developing this collaborative relationship is to guide and empower clients to identify their own skills, resources, and resilience in order to improve their wellbeing and mental health and facilitate personal growth, as expressed by one respondent: “A therapist works within the therapeutic relationship to support the client to develop insight into their psychological patterns, increase awareness and become more intentional (conscious) and choiceful [sic] in their lives”. Aligned with a holistic approach, “Counsellors often collaborate with other professionals and community resources to ensure comprehensive support for their clients”.

A subtheme identified under the concept of prioritising the therapist–client relationship is therapeutic sensitivity. Therapeutic sensitivity in counselling refers to a counsellor’s ability to attune to the needs of the client’s emotional and psychological states. Participants described this sensitivity in various ways, such as creating cultural safety, acceptance of diversity, and flexibility and adaptability both in the approaches used and the acceptance of working at the client’s pace. Almost 50% of participants provided detail on these elements of therapeutic sensitivity, highlighting their centrality in the counselling profession, for example: “Counsellors strive to be culturally competent and sensitive to the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their clients. This includes understanding the impact of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other identity factors on clients’ lives and experiences”.

Many participants felt that the emphasis on the relationship as a therapeutic intervention sets the counselling profession apart from other helping professions. This was most articulately expressed in the following quotation:

Nurturing the therapeutic relationship (through skills, approaches and connection) to maximise client wellbeing is the core work of the counsellor. Registered counsellors desire

to support client progress towards positive outcomes using therapeutic techniques and approaches within a client–therapist relationship. The client–therapist relationship is unique in this context, as compared to allied health professionals who might use counselling skills as part of their particular work.

Professionalism

The final theme expresses how counsellors conduct themselves, focusing on the professionalism exhibited and required by counsellors. Nearly half of all respondents (46.2%) reflected on the ethical commitment that counsellors make in their practice as a core value. Ensuring confidentiality, maintaining professional boundaries, and holding one's integrity to account were frequently reported as critical elements of their profession.

In addition, a commitment to professional development, including training and the use of evidence-informed approaches, was a priority for 46.2% of participants. However, several participants noted that engaging in evidence-informed practice did not necessarily mean application of the medical model, which focuses on diagnostics; rather, a holistic approach to applying evidence was favoured, as demonstrated below:

Holding empirical research and evidence-based interventions as highly important & essential to effective work, we hold these with critical thinking & do not apply as though we are using a recipe: counselling requires high levels of critical thought & a sophisticated/flexible approach as we need to apply evidence-based thought/techniques through the lens of the client's expertise about their lives.

Finally, a commitment to personal development was equally important and cited as a quality of the counselling profession by 53.8% of participants. Participants highlighted that continuous learning, self-awareness, and self-reflection were critical to successful counselling and a core value that underpins the profession. This relied on effective supervision and reflective practice, for both of which the counsellor was viewed to be responsible. Many participants noted the importance of counsellors being held accountable for their practice, either by themselves or by their professional association, to ensure quality practice.

Discussion

This study was advertised through both peak counselling associations in Australia and via social media, and it collected the views of 26 registered counsellors regarding the core shared values of the counselling profession. The three themes identified were prioritisation of the client by the Australian counselling profession, the prioritisation of the client–therapist relationship, and professionalism focusing on the professional and personal development

of the practitioners. Before discussing these, it is worth repeating that identifying core values that are prioritised by the counselling profession does not imply that other professions do not ascribe to the values, nor does it imply that those values omitted are not enacted in the counselling profession. It is the level of emphasis or the centrality of certain values in the professional identity that denote them as core.

Centrality of the client and prioritisation of the therapeutic relationship and the descriptions that accompanied these themes reflect the humanistic values most associated with Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1951). A humanistic stance can be a lens through which to review one's own conduct and the material being taught to students. However, prioritising the client, recognising client strengths, and intentionally building therapeutic relationships does not mean that counsellors do not have expertise, eschew evidence-based treatments, or ignore pathological behaviours or expressions. A lack of equal emphasis or even a contrasting emphasis (e.g., strengths focus rather than pathologisation) does not signal a rejection of what is de-emphasised. Consequently, even when employing the same therapeutic modalities and paradigms as other mental health professionals, the delivery of these is distinctly influenced by a humanistic commitment. For instance, research conducted by a large employee assistance provider, Converge International, examined 12 months of data comparing the practice of its psychologists, social workers, and counsellors. The findings demonstrated that, comparatively, counsellors gained the highest rapport with clients, received the fewest client complaints, and demonstrated the highest comparative levels of understanding and helpfulness with client issues (Page, 2020). These results might be expected from professionals who prioritise clients and therapeutic relationships, while also working on their own individual professional growth.

The results of the present study also align with current understandings of the common factors approach. This approach, rather than emphasising treatment type and technique, emphasises client factors, the therapeutic relationship, and therapist factors, which are responsible for a larger proportion of treatment outcomes (Norcross & Lambert, 2019; Wampold, 2015). While they are not mutually exclusive and it would be a mistake to attempt to use only relationship or focus only on assessment and techniques (Norcross & Lambert, 2019), individuals and professions can lean more heavily towards one or the other. This distinction is often characterised by a preference for the subjective personal dimension, and the other as the objective scientific dimension. In Australia, it appears the counselling profession, according to the respondents participating in this study, leans towards the subjective personal and interpersonal dimensions. An example of this is noted in a thesis examining the therapeutic relationship focus of Master of Counselling and Master of Psychology courses. It showed that 100% of Master of Counselling courses incorporated language associated with the therapeutic relationship, compared with Master of Clinical Psychology at 60% and Master of Professional Psychology at 53% (McMullen et al., 2024).

The distinct value differences between these two professions were also noted by students transitioning from psychology to counselling studies (Saywell et al., 2024).

The data collected for this study aligns well with the proposed National Standards for Counsellors and Psychotherapists (Allen + Clarke Consulting, 2025). These standards prioritise a client-focused approach, the therapeutic relationship, and the promotion of professionalism and ongoing professional development among practitioners. The alignment between these participant perspectives and the National Standards suggests a growing consensus on what constitutes the “heart” of counselling practice in Australia. The articulation of this shared value system provides a robust foundation for practitioners to maintain their distinct professional lens while navigating increasingly integrated multidisciplinary environments.

Implications

This study provides a grassroots practitioner perspective of what counsellors believe are the core and distinctive values of the counselling profession. Its focus is on the Australian setting. However, other countries have also grappled with this issue. In 2014, the then divided and fragmented counselling profession in the United States, using the Delphi method, worked to develop a consensus of its priorities and a shared definition of counselling that would be adopted across the profession (Kaplan et al., 2014). In a similar spirit, we recommend both peak bodies work together to identify and adopt an agreed set of shared values that can support a more unified understanding of the profession, while also helping it become more readily understood by other professionals, funders, clients, and the community at large. While this would not remove all the confusion and ambiguity associated with the counselling profession in Australia, it may play a part in creating a common and agreed local understanding.

We also recommend that values articulated by the profession are clearly reflected in primary ethical, practice, and educational documentation. Such values provide consistent reference points. This is particularly important in relation to training standards because the profession relies on educators, sometimes from different professional heritages, to socialise and prepare students for the profession. Having shared values does not reduce diversity, since providers can still teach from their own preferred modalities. Rather, it creates a common understanding regarding what it means to be a counsellor and is inclusive of related specialist identities that also form part of the profession.

Limitations

Our original hope for this study was to obtain at least 100 responses to provide stronger confidence in the generalisability of the results. The low response rate of 26 was unexpected. While some responses provided relatively richer and more comprehensive data than others, enabling deeper qualitative analysis, the relatively low response rate detracts from the strength

of the findings. A notable limitation is that because the survey was hosted online and did not collect identifying membership data to protect participant privacy, the researchers cannot independently verify that the sample was comprised solely of currently registered practitioners. Consequently, the findings rely on the integrity of the self-reported professional status of the participants. Methodologically, using a qualitative online survey restricted us from probing more deeply and clarifying responses, a common criticism of this method in thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2021). While this was a limitation, the study's focus shifted from expecting data richness in individual responses to exploring richness across the dataset. In addition, we believe the survey offered flexibility, anonymity, and accessibility to a geographically dispersed sample of practitioners and was more likely to gain candid disclosure without the social desirability influence of interviews (Braun et al., 2021).

Future Research

This study has provided a sound starting place for clarifying some Australian counsellors' understandings and viewpoints of the core and distinguishing values of the profession. To strengthen, expand, alter, or clarify these findings with more confidence, we recommend two additional areas of study. The first is to undertake a broader systematic literature or scoping review of the existing scholarly literature and contemporary professional literature to identify the predominant values expressed as being linked with the counselling profession's identity. The second is to consult with key leaders in the counselling and psychotherapy profession in a Delphi study or equivalent. Both these additional sources of data would enable triangulation, thus increasing the authority of and confidence placed in the identified values that underpin the profession. This would provide important data and conclusions for the profession to draw on if it decides to clarify, determine, articulate, and embed core distinguishing values that represent the profession overall.

Conclusion

This study explored what a small sample of registered counsellors in Australia perceives to be the core values of the counselling profession. It is the first study of its kind to clarify common values held by practitioners in Australia. Given its relatively small number of responses, the study can be viewed only as a starting point of clarification, and additional data must be collected to increase confidence. However, including the practitioner voice in the data collection is an important source for understanding what the rank-and-file members perceive to be the values underpinning the profession with which they identify. We hope that the profession in Australia will move towards delineating and articulating the values that already underpin it, for the sake of student socialisation, for its own members' identity, and for the benefit of external stakeholders.

Published: March 11, 2026 AEST.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

References

- Allen + Clarke Consulting. (2025). *Proposed national standards for counsellors and psychotherapists summary report*. Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, Australian Government. https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-10/national-standards-for-counsellors-and-psychotherapists-summary-report_1.pdf
- Australian Association of Social Workers. (2024). *Australian social work education and accreditation standards (ASWEAS)*. <https://aasw-prod.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/00.-AASW-ASWEAS-2024.pdf>
- Australian Counselling Association. (2012). *Accreditation of counsellor higher education courses*. <https://www.theaca.net.au/documents/ACA%20Accreditation%20of%20Counsellor%20Higher%20Education%20Programs%202013.pdf>
- Australian Counselling Association. (2020). *Scope of practice for registered counsellors* (2nd ed.). <https://theaca.net.au/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=ee2bdf8-753d-4ab5-87d5-019721bcfcc2&forceDialog=1>
- Australian Counselling Association. (2022). *Code of ethics and practice of the Australian Counselling Association* (16th ed.). <https://theaca.net.au/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=8c9283a0-9fcb-4aae-15a4-febd16a21eab&forceDialog=1>
- Australian Psychology Accreditation Council. (2019). *Accreditation standards for psychology programs*. https://www.psychologycouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/public/Standards_20180912_Published_Final_v1.2.pdf
- Beel, N. (2024). The Australian counselling profession in 2030: An educator's perspective. *Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.94532>
- Beel, N., Taylor, S., & Chinchin, C. (2025). Shaping the profession: Australian counselling educators' perspectives on professional identity, values, and education. *Psychotherapy & Counselling Journal of Australia*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.129711>
- Bloch-Atefi, A., Day, E., Snell, T., & O'Neill, G. (2021). A snapshot of the counselling and psychotherapy workforce in Australia in 2020: Underutilised and poorly remunerated, yet highly qualified and desperately needed. *Psychotherapy & Counselling Journal of Australia*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.71216>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Boulton, E., Davey, L., & McEvoy, C. (2021). The online survey as a qualitative research tool. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 24(6), 641–654. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1805550>
- Burns, S., & Cruikshanks, D. R. (2017). Evaluating independently licensed counselors' articulation of professional identity using structural coding. *The Professional Counselor*, 7(2), 185–207. <https://doi.org/10.15241/sb.7.2.185>
- Choate, L. H., Smith, S. L., & Spruill, D. A. (2005). Professional development of counselor education students: An exploratory study of professional performance indicators for assessment. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 27(3), 383–397. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-005-8201-0>
- Cohen, R. J., & Swerdlik, M. E. (2018). *Psychological testing and assessment: An introduction to tests and measurement* (9th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

- Day, E. (2015). Psychotherapy and counselling in Australia: Profiling our philosophical heritage for therapeutic effectiveness. *Psychotherapy & Counselling Journal of Australia*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.71145>
- Dollarhide, C. T., Gibson, D. M., Brashear, K. L., Huynh, J., Marshall, B., & Robinson, K. (2023). Lessons from professional identity development literature: A qualitative content analysis. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 62(3), 207–221. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12269>
- Gale, A. U., & Austin, B. D. (2003). Professionalism's challenges to professional counselors' collective identity. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 81(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2003.tb00219.x>
- Granello, D. H., & Gunawan, N. (2023). Strengthening the identity of the counselling profession in Indonesia. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 45(3), 560–576. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-023-09515-2>
- Harrison, M. G. (2023). School counselling in Hong Kong: A profession in need of an identity. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 45(1), 138–154. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-022-09498-6>
- House of Representatives Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. (2021). *Mental health and suicide prevention—Final report*. Commonwealth of Australia. https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/024705/toc_pdf/MentalHealthandSuicidePrevention-FinalReport.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf
- Hsi, T., & Boman, P. (2022). The development of professional identity among counsellors in tertiary educational institutions in Singapore. *Counselling & Psychotherapy Review Singapore*, 01(01), 19–27. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2810968623500031>
- Johnson, W. B., & Kaslow, N. J. (2014). On developing professional psychologists: The state of the art and a look ahead. In W. B. Johnson & N. J. Kaslow (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of education and training in professional psychology* (pp. 1–13). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199874019.001.0001>
- Kaplan, D. M., Tarvydas, V. M., & Gladding, S. T. (2014). 20/20: A vision for the future of counseling: The new consensus definition of counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 92(3), 366–372. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2014.00164.x>
- Lincicome, M. B. A. (2015). *Opening the doors: Professional identity in counselor educators* [Doctoral dissertation, Barry University].
- McMullen, C., Krantz, S., & Beel, N. (2024). *The inclusion of rapport in Australian postgraduate psychology programs* [Unpublished manuscript]. School of Psychology and Wellbeing, University of Southern Queensland.
- Mellin, E. A., Hunt, B., & Nichols, L. M. (2011). Counselor professional identity: Findings and implications for counseling and interprofessional collaboration. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 89(2), 140–147. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2011.tb00071.x>
- Moir-Bussy, A., Andrews, K., & Smith, T. (2016). Toward a unified vision of professional counselling identity: A preliminary Australian perspective. *Australian Counselling Research Journal*, 10(2). <https://www.acrjournal.com.au/resources/assets/journals/Volume-10-Issue-2-2016/Toward%20a%20Unified%20Vision%20of%20Professional%20Counselling%20Identity%201-31.pdf>
- Moorhead, H. J. H., Duncan, K., & Fernandez, M. S. (2023). The critical need for professional advocacy: A call to the counseling profession to value professional counselor identity. *Journal of Counselor Leadership and Advocacy*, 10(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2326716X.2023.2178985>

- Mrdjenovich, A. J., & Moore, B. A. (2004). The professional identity of counselling psychologists in health care: A review and call for research. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 17(1), 69–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070410001665758>
- Norcross, J. C., & Lambert, M. J. (2019). Evidence-based psychotherapy relationships: The third task force. In J. C. Norcross & M. J. Lambert (Eds.), *Psychotherapy relationships that work: Volume 1: Evidence-based therapist contributions* (3rd ed., pp. 1–23). Oxford University Press.
- O'Hara, D. J. (2023). Conceptions of counselling and psychotherapy: Towards professional self-clarification. *Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.88162>
- O'Hara, D. J., & O'Hara, E. F. (2015). Counselling and psychotherapy: Professionalisation in the Australian context. *Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.71147>
- Page, C. (2020). *Counselling efficacy between professions: A comparison between counsellors, psychologists and social workers delivering employee assistance programs* [White paper]. Converge International. [https://pacfa.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/PCFA/Research%20studies/Counselling%20Efficacy%20between%20Professions%20\(1\).pdf](https://pacfa.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/PCFA/Research%20studies/Counselling%20Efficacy%20between%20Professions%20(1).pdf)
- Perron, N. C. D., Lim, V. H., Isenman, L., & Yamoah, K. G. (2023). International counseling values: Recognizing valued approaches identified by international counseling professionals through qualitative inquiry. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, 45, 330–355. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-023-09505-4>
- Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia. (2017). *Code of ethics*. <https://pacfa.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/PCFA/Documents/Documents%20and%20Forms/PACFA-Code-of-Ethics-2017.pdf>
- Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia. (2018). *PACFA scope of practice for registered counsellors*. <https://pacfa.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/PCFA/Documents/Documents%20and%20Forms/Scope-of-Practice-for-Registered-Counsellors-2018.pdf>
- Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia. (2025a). *Accreditation standards for counselling programs (Version 1.0)*. https://pacfa.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/PCFA/PACFA_Accreditation-Standards-Counselling-final-web.pdf
- Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia. (2025b). *Professional competencies for registration as a certified practising counsellor*. https://pacfa.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/PCFA/News/enews%20and%20latest%20news%20documents/PACFA_Competencies_CPC_final_web.pdf
- Puglia, B. (2008). *The professional identity of counseling students in Master's level CACREP accredited programs* [Doctoral Dissertation, Old Dominion University]. <https://doi.org/10.25777/5045-zb17>
- Remley, T. P., Jr., & Herlihy, B. (2025). *Ethical, legal, and professional issues in counseling* (7th ed.). Pearson.
- Rogers, C. (1951). *Client-centered therapy: Its current practice, implications and theory*. Constable.
- Saywell, C. L., Beel, N., du Plessis, C., & McMullen, C. (2024). Understanding the transition from psychology graduate to postgraduate counselling student. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 33(2), 188–198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10384162241255803>
- Schofield, M. J. (2008). Australian counsellors and psychotherapists: A profile of the profession. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 8(1), 4–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733140801936369>

- Spurgeon, S. L. (2012). Counselor identity—A national imperative. *Journal of Professional Counseling: Practice, Theory & Research*, 39(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15566382.2012.12033878>
- Storey, A., & McGarry, D. (2022). Mental health in the interprofessional context. In N. Proctor, R. L. Wilson, H. P. Hamer, D. McGarry, & M. Loughhead (Eds.), *Mental health: A person-centred approach* (3rd ed., pp. 144–172). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108980883.010>
- Wampold, B. E. (2015). How important are the common factors in psychotherapy? An update. *World Psychiatry*, 14(3), 270–277. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20238>
- Weinrach, S. G., Thomas, K. R., & Chan, F. (2001). The professional identity of contributors to the *Journal of Counseling & Development*: Does it matter? *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 79(2), 166–170. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2001.tb01956.x>
- Woo, H., Henfield, M. S., & Choi, N. (2014). Developing a unified professional identity in counseling: A review of the literature. *Journal of Counselor Leadership and Advocacy*, 1(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2326716X.2014.895452>