

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Practice of Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2025) by Denis O'Hara, Jim Schirmer, Michael Ellwood, and Kate Witteveen. The University of Queensland. ISBN: 9781742724065**

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This review examines *The Practice of Counselling and Psychotherapy* (O'Hara et al., 2025), an open-access introductory text developed by educators from The University of Queensland's Master of Counselling program. The book presents counselling and psychotherapy as fundamentally relational practices, integrating philosophical, theoretical, neurobiological, systemic, and professional perspectives within a coherent framework. Particular strengths of this book include its treatment of common factors research, the role of hope in therapeutic change, neurobiological literacy for practitioners, integrative case formulation, and strong pedagogical design. The text successfully balances accessibility with conceptual depth, rendering it especially suitable for students and early-career practitioners. While a more sustained discussion of contemporary professional and regulatory issues within the Australian context would further strengthen its relevance for practising counsellors and psychotherapists, the volume nevertheless represents a significant contribution to counselling and psychotherapy education.

There is no shortage of introductory texts on counselling and psychotherapy. The field has been well served by comprehensive handbooks, theory-specific manuals, and skills-based workbooks for several decades (e.g., Norcross & Goldfried, 2019; Wedding & Corsini, 2018). What distinguishes *The Practice of Counselling and Psychotherapy* (O'Hara et al., 2025), a collaborative, open-access text developed by educators from The University of Queensland's Master of Counselling program, is its frank acknowledgement of what most introductory texts struggle to convey: that therapy is as much an art as it is a science, and that which sustains effective practice often relates less to technique than the quality of the human encounter.

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Authored by four experienced practitioners and educators, Denis O'Hara, Jim Schirmer, Michael Ellwood, and Kate Witteveen, the book is the product of a shared pedagogical philosophy rather than a single author's voice, and this is both its greatest strength and one of its few structural limitations. Across 11 chapters, the text moves from foundational questions about professional identity through major theoretical orientations, on to neurobiological considerations, systemic perspectives, case formulation, and finally professional practice. The scope is ambitious for a text of roughly 200 pages, yet the authors largely succeed in their stated aim: to illuminate not just what therapists do, but how and why it matters, since this is a question of direct and ongoing relevance to Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) members and to the broader Australian counselling and psychotherapy community. Underpinning the volume is a coherent philosophical commitment to understanding therapy primarily as a relational process rather than a technical procedure. This concern with what actually occurs between therapist and client recurs throughout the text and provides a unifying thread across otherwise diverse theoretical perspectives.

In the interests of transparency, the reviewer discloses the following collegial relationships with two of the authors. Kate Witteveen and the reviewer were once employed concurrently at the same academic institution, although the relationship was one of geographical distance, Witteveen based in Brisbane and the reviewer in Adelaide, and the two did not work together directly. Denis O'Hara held the position of chair of discipline at that same university college prior to the reviewer's appointment, meaning the two did not overlap professionally. The reviewer has no current working relationship with either author. Lead author O'Hara has also published previously in the *Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia* (PACJA), including through the PACJA Viewpoints series, and Witteveen contributed to Volume 13(2) of this journal. Furthermore, author Jim Schirmer is a member of PACJA's editorial board and PACFA's research committee. These connections are declared in accordance with PACJA's peer-review standards; the review reflects an independent assessment of the text on its merits.

The opening chapter, authored by O'Hara, sets the philosophical register for what follows. Rather than treating the definition of counselling as a routine administrative task, O'Hara engages seriously with the conceptual difficulties of distinguishing the term "counselling" from adjacent mental health professions, a question of acute professional significance in the Australian context, where the regulatory landscape for counsellors and psychotherapists remains contested and evolving. He foregrounds the concept of the self, arguing that an encounter with a client's inner world is the irreducible core of the therapeutic endeavour, and he introduces active listening not as a discrete skill to be acquired but as a complex, multidimensional practice involving cognitive, affective, and relational capacities simultaneously. The musical analogy offered here—that learning therapeutic sub-skills is akin to learning scales, necessary but insufficient

for playing a concerto—is the kind of integrating metaphor that renders difficult concepts memorable and serves as a useful guiding theme for much of the text. More broadly, the text can be read as a contribution to the continuing professionalisation of counselling and psychotherapy in Australia. By articulating a coherent account of therapist identity, evidence-informed practice, and professional responsibility, the volume helps clarify the distinctive contribution of counselling within an increasingly complex mental health landscape.

Chapter 2, on common and specific factors of therapeutic change, is one of the book's strongest contributions and one that will resonate strongly with PACJA's evidence-informed readership. O'Hara provides a clear and well-grounded account of the common factors research tradition, from the early framework of Jerome Frank (Frank & Frank, 1963/1993) to Michael Lambert's (1992) four-factor model, while engaging meaningfully with the limitations of the so-called "Dodo bird verdict". Crucially, the chapter avoids the reductivism that can mar common factors discussions: rather than suggesting that theory and technique are irrelevant, the author argues that common and specific factors are mutually reinforcing, and he frames this not as a settled question but as an ongoing area of empirical inquiry. The treatment of hope is particularly notable. O'Hara draws on Snyder's (2002) goal-focused hope theory and Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) foundational definition, before introducing a third typology, *transformative hope*, developed by O'Hara and O'Hara (2021). This brings relevant scholarly rigour to a construct that is frequently acknowledged but rarely examined carefully in clinical training literature and connects productively to O'Hara's prior published work in PACJA (O'Hara, 2025) and elsewhere (O'Hara, 2013).

Kate Witteveen's chapter on neurobiology for counsellors (Chapter 3) is a genuinely valuable addition that reflects evolving expectations for contemporary Australian practitioners, including PACFA members working across complex presentations such as trauma, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and attachment disruption. The chapter equips readers with sufficient neurobiological literacy to understand the embodied dimensions of distress and therapeutic change, such as stress response systems, attachment neuroscience, and the neurological correlates of trauma. Witteveen's writing is accessible without being simplistic, and she is careful to connect neurobiological insights to the relational and phenomenological concerns of the book generally.

O'Hara's treatment of person-centred therapy (Chapter 4) provides an important bridge between the philosophical foundations established in earlier chapters and the more theory-specific chapters that follow. Rather than presenting Carl Rogers' core conditions (Rogers, 2011) as historical artefacts, the chapter repositions empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard as enduring foundations of therapeutic practice. Particularly effective is the argument that person-centred principles are not confined to one

therapeutic school but continue to inform contemporary integrative practice. In this respect, the chapter reinforces one of the book's central themes: that the therapist's way of being remains as important as the interventions they employ.

Jim Schirmer's chapter on existential and gestalt theory (Chapter 5) is particularly notable for its richness of clinical illustration. The extended treatment of the joining process (i.e., the careful work of welcoming a client, clarifying their hopes and concerns, and extending the invitation to tell their story) is managed with a level of nuance and practical wisdom that early-career practitioners and readers will find immediately useful. The use of illustrative counsellor–client dialogues throughout is consistently well done, grounding abstract theory in the texture of actual therapeutic exchange. This dialogic approach is one of the book's most effective pedagogical choices, grounding theoretical concepts in the realities of therapeutic practice and helping readers bridge the gap between conceptual understanding and clinical application.

Chapter 6 introduces psychodynamic theory in a manner that is both accessible and unusually balanced for an introductory book. O'Hara succeeds in distilling complex concepts such as unconscious processes, defence mechanisms, transference, and countertransference without reducing them to simplistic formulations. Particularly noteworthy is the way psychodynamic ideas are presented not as relics of an earlier era of psychotherapy, but as enduring explanatory tools that continue to illuminate relational patterns and intrapsychic conflict. For readers new to the tradition, the chapter provides a balanced introduction that situates psychodynamic thinking within contemporary integrative practice.

Michael Ellwood's Chapter 7, "Moving Towards Change", functions as an important transitional chapter within the volume, connecting conceptual understanding with practical therapeutic action. Drawing together themes of readiness, motivation, and agency, Ellwood emphasises the collaborative nature of change and the therapist's role in helping clients move from insight to implementation. The chapter's strength lies in its pragmatic orientation; rather than assuming that awareness naturally produces change, it acknowledges the ambivalence and complexity that often accompany attempts at personal transformation. Thus, it provides a useful bridge between theory and intervention for emerging practitioners.

Michael Ellwood's subsequent chapter on systemic perspectives (Chapter 8) widens the book's focus from the individual client to the relational and contextual systems within which distress and change are embedded. Drawing on family systems theory, systemic attention to patterns of interaction, and the importance of context in meaning-making, the chapter introduces a different theoretical register without losing the book's relational focus. Its value lies in helping readers recognise that client difficulties are not located solely within the individual, but are often maintained, intensified, or softened within wider relational fields.

Jim Schirmer's applied case formulation chapter (Chapter 9) is highly practical and applicable for practitioners. Schirmer's account of case formulation as a process of description, organisation, and (borrowing from Gregory Bateson, 1985) *double description*, is analytically elegant and clinically grounded. The one-page formulation exercise, built around the case of Emily (developed further in Appendix B), provides readers with a concrete, structured pathway into the otherwise daunting task of synthesising complex client material across theoretical frameworks. The adaptation of the power-threat-meaning framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) as an alternative approach to case formulation aligns extremely well with the integrative and person-centred values that underpin PACFA's approach to registration and practice.

Chapter 10 on integration is the intellectual centrepiece of the book. O'Hara traces the historical trajectory from theoretical allegiance and turf wars towards pluralistic and integrative models, constructing a persuasive case for integration as both an empirical and an ethical necessity. The acknowledgement that no single theory can adequately capture the complexity of human experience and that effective case formulation requires moving across multiple theoretical lenses is offered with appropriate epistemic humility and connects directly to PACFA's own integrative and inclusive approach to defining competent practice. Viewed retrospectively, the structure of the book reveals a deliberate pedagogical progression. The person-centred foundations presented in Chapter 4, the relational depth of psychodynamic theory in Chapter 6, the practical orientation towards change in Chapter 7, and the subsequent systemic and formulation chapters collectively prepare the reader for the integrative argument presented here. Integration therefore emerges not merely as another theoretical orientation, but as the organising logic of the book as a whole.

The final chapter on professional practice, co-authored by Schirmer and Witteveen, covers ethics, supervision, self-care, and the ongoing formation of professional identity. It is a sound chapter, though somewhat compressed relative to the significance of its content. For PACFA members specifically, more sustained attention to the implications of Australia's current environment of professional self-regulation and the absence of statutory registration for counsellors and psychotherapists (including the tensions concerning scope of practice, and lack of Medicare access and Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency [AHPRA] registration) would have strengthened the text's relevance to its most likely professional readership. This is not a criticism of the authors' intent so much as an observation about an opportunity: the book is extremely well positioned to speak to the Australian context and might, in a future edition, do so more explicitly.

One further limitation worth noting concerns cultural responsiveness. While the text is attentive to relational, developmental, and systemic dimensions of practice, it demonstrates limited engagement with culturally situated understandings of healing and wellbeing. This is most evident in

the absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on healing, wellbeing, or the therapeutic relationship. Given that PACJA explicitly includes Indigenous healing practices within its scope, and that PACFA has emphasised cultural responsiveness as a core competency for members, this is a meaningful gap in a text that otherwise positions itself as contextually aware. The inclusion of an Acknowledgement of Country reflects the authors' commitment to cultural recognition. However, future editions could enhance this commitment through deeper engagement with First Nations epistemologies and healing frameworks within the clinical material.

These reservations notwithstanding, *The Practice of Counselling and Psychotherapy* is a welcome and substantive contribution to the Australian counselling and psychotherapy literature. It is philosophically grounded, clinically appropriate, and consistently oriented towards the qualities of personhood, relationship, and evidence-informed reflexivity that characterise competent practice. Its open-access format, published under a Creative Commons licence and freely downloadable from The University of Queensland, is an act of pedagogical equity that deserves recognition and ensures the text is immediately accessible to practitioners, students, and supervisors across Australia and internationally.

Beyond its theoretical content, the text demonstrates considerable pedagogical sophistication. Key takeaways, reflective questions, clinical dialogues, case examples, and formulation exercises are integrated throughout, encouraging readers to move beyond passive consumption of theory towards active clinical reflection. The appendices are especially useful in this regard. Schirmer's collection of hypothesis-generating questions drawn from major therapeutic traditions and the worked formulation example based on the case of Emily provide practical tools that supervisors, educators, and other readers can readily adopt. These features render the volume particularly well suited to counsellor education programs and supervised training contexts, extending its value beyond that of a conventional introductory textbook.

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