The transition from postgraduate counselling student to working counsellor: A qualitative investigation

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During my corporate career of more than 25 years in human resources (HR), I had thousands of conversations with individuals in many countries about career choices and experiences. I encountered a wide range of responses—from those who felt they had felt a calling from a young age to people who had drifted from career to career, searching for something that felt right. More recently, I have had many, less formal, conversations with postgraduate counselling students, counsellors, and counselling lecturers about their reasons for choosing a career in a helping profession and their early career experiences.

Some scholars have explored the early life events that lead individuals to choose careers in helping professions (McCauley, 2005; Norcross & Farber, 2005; Rompf & Royse, 1994). Many others have examined the risks of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma that can arise from careers in these professions (Atkinson, 1996; Canfield, 2005). Nevertheless, scant information exists about the early career experiences of those entering these professions. Indeed, Corey and Corey (2011) noted that the topic of selecting counselling or psychotherapy as a career is seldom explored in mental health journals. A review of the literature delivered nothing pertaining specifically to the transition from postgraduate student to working counsellor or psychotherapist.[1]

This research, inspired by the author's converging career perspectives of HR, individuals' career choices, and counselling, provides an opportunity to illuminate the lived experience of an aspect of counsellors' careers that has, to date, received limited attention: that being the transition from postgraduate counselling student to working counsellor.

Literature Review

Initial searches were performed using the electronic databases PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES, Sage Journals, and Google Scholar using search terms such as ("counsellor" OR "psychotherapist" OR "therapist") AND ("career" OR "early career" OR "career experience" OR "transition" OR "entry" OR "initial" OR "graduate"). Later searches were broadened to include other helping professions, such as ("police*" OR "law

enforcement" OR "nurse" OR "doctor" OR "psychiatrist" OR "fire*" OR "paramedic"). Further searches sought research on career transitions in general and included terms such as ("career transition" OR "new career" OR "career change" OR "second career").

Both qualitative and quantitative studies were captured. Qualitative studies were included to investigate the lived experience of participants undergoing career transitions. Quantitative studies were included to seek information on career transition variables that might have been identified or established. Studies published in English from any country were considered, and no limit on the year in which the studies were conducted was imposed. In practice, the research presented in this paper dates from 1980 to 2020, with 82% of the papers cited having been published since 2005.

While limited published research is available on the experience of becoming a counsellor or psychotherapist, studies do exist in areas adjacent to this topic, and from these five themes are apparent:

- Existing research concerns helping professions other than counselling and focuses on initial career choices, not post-choice experiences.
- Much of the research is quantitative, focusing on metrics such as the number of years in practice.
- Where the focus is on new counsellors and psychotherapists, much of the research presents reflections from highly experienced practitioners rather than discussions with recent entrants to the profession.
- Where the focus is on career transition, studies largely relate to mid-life career changes and do not examine specific professions.
- A developing research cluster exists examining the experience of doctoral psychology students and their skill development during practicum placements.

The following subsections discuss the key research findings concerning these five themes.

Choosing a Career in a Helping Profession

While significant research has been published relating broadly to helping professions, the vast majority is focused on professions other than counselling—such as nursing (Mooney et al., 2008), social work (Rompf & Royse, 1994), and emergency services (Vermeer et al., 2020). Further, most of this research relates to the reasons people choose to work in helping professions (McCauley, 2005; Norcross & Farber, 2005) and tends to focus on significant background events that might lead someone to make such a choice. Reasons might include having experienced domestic and family violence, some other traumatic event, or a serious illness. Such reasons for entering helping professions are typically characterised under two primary paradigms—either the mythological image of the wounded healer (Norcross & Farber, 2005) or a feeling of internalised guilt and social responsibility (McCauley, 2005).

Much has been written about the reasons for choosing a career as a social worker. These studies explored the impact of significant life events (Rompf & Royse, 1994), religion and spirituality (Hirsbrunner et al., 2012), and the attitudes of undergraduate social work students towards social work (Secret et al., 2003). Similar investigations have been conducted into the choice of a career in nursing, finding that a desire to care for others often ranks highly (Mooney et al., 2008), as well as the reasons for choosing a career in the police force, often identifying a desire to protect (Vermeer et al., 2020). Contrary studies into paramedicine have also explored why people choose to leave that profession in Australia (Blau & Chapman, 2016) and in Israel (Dopelt et al., 2019). Both of these studies showed compassion fatigue as a common reason for leaving.

Bandura (1982) wrote extensively on the significance that chance encounters play in determining life and career directions. Indeed, chance meetings feature heavily in the career paths of prominent psychotherapists described by Dryden and Spurling (1989), Goldfried (2001), and Burton (1972, as cited in Norcross & Farber, 2005). Examples of these chance encounters included a conversation at a restaurant that led to a change in career and a missed enrolment deadline that led to a change in college major.

The exploration that, on the surface, feels most synergistic to this research topic is a study undertaken by Lewis and Emil (2010) of school counsellors completing master's programs at colleges in the United States between 2000 and 2005. Their research was designed to identify the extent to which respondents felt confident that what they had learned in college had provided them with a strong foundation for helping students in their schools. However, that is where the research similarity ends. Lewis and Emil's (2010) aim was specifically to identify opportunities to improve master's programs based on students' perceptions of their educational experience, rather than to investigate the experience of the transition into employment itself.

Qualitative Research on Mental Health Practitioners

Like Lewis and Emil's (2010) study, much of the research about psychotherapists and psychologists is quantitative in nature: for example, measuring the increase over decades of the percentage of psychologists working in private practice in the United States. Specific studies have examined the career path of counselling psychologists in the United States (Stedman et al., 1995), the change in the professional identities of clinical psychologists during their residency training in the United States (Woodward et al., 2015), and clinical psychologists' experience of their internship training in South Africa (Johnston & Pillay, 2011). These studies examined long-term trends in these professions by using quantitative surveys with large sample sizes. Findings included a trend demonstrating that counselling psychologists were moving into private practice earlier in their careers, although further research would be required to investigate the reasons behind this trend.

The Voice of Experience

Extensive literature provides advice and guidance to new counsellors and psychotherapists, generally written by experienced practitioners reflecting on long careers. Sometimes these books are written using a quasi-academic, structured approach with chapters dedicated to specific topics, such as how to engage with a new client, whether to take notes in sessions, or the importance of remaining in the here and now (Skovholt, 2012; Willer, 2014; Yalom, 2010). The target audiences for such books are clinical practitioners and aspiring practitioners. Other books are written in narrative form, describing de-identified cases in some detail to demonstrate therapeutic techniques or client progress (Gottlieb, 2019; Grosz, 2014; Yalom, 2006). The target audiences for these are clinical practitioners, and also their clients or those looking for self-help. Rather than representing peer-reviewed research, these books are primarily resource materials, although two of the authors—Irvin Yalom and Windy Dryden—are also prolific researchers and academic writers in their own right. While no specific conclusions on the experience of new counsellors can be drawn from such material, the sheer abundance of this type of literature means it cannot be totally ignored. Based on the sales success of these books, some of which have been reprinted several times over many years, it would appear an appetite exists for learning from the career experience of being a counsellor.

Mid-life Career Changes

Many of those who joined the workforce in Western economies before the 1960s would have expected to remain with one company, and in largely the same profession, for the remainder of their working careers. However, those who joined the workforce in the 1980s had experienced an average of 12.4 jobs by the time they reached the age of 32 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Increasingly frequent career changes are expected to remain a global trend (Barclay et al., 2011). When exactly a change in job reaches the threshold to become a change in career is a point of some conjecture in the literature, although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these differences. Nevertheless, as the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) data cited above demonstrate, given the sheer number of people who, voluntarily or otherwise, embark on a career change, it is unsurprising that significant research exists attempting to identify the characteristics of a good career transition.

Muja and Appelbaum's (2012) research identified the importance of career transitioners having a sound understanding of their current state of mind, engaging in conscious planning, and forming realistic expectations. In a contrasting study, Barabasch (2014) examined the career biographies of 125 individuals from five European countries. The individuals' stories demonstrated how life's unexpected events, rather than conscious planning, can affect decisions to change career and the career transition experience. The consistent thread linking these two contrasting studies is the link between individual agency and effective career change.

Despite the breadth of career transition research that exists, available studies focused almost exclusively on the general factors present in a mid-career change rather than the lived experience of those entering a new profession (Barabasch, 2014; Barclay et al.,

2011; Muja & Appelbaum, 2012; Wang et al., 2013). Moreover, the research is largely profession agnostic, and no studies were found relating to counsellors.

Practicum Skills Development

Owing to likely differences in both individual accountability and access to support, a counsellor's practicum placement is not directly comparable to seeing therapy clients on their own. Nevertheless, while only a handful of studies have been found concerning this area, their authors believe there are lessons to be learned. Hill et al. (2007), in a study on doctoral psychotherapy students, highlighted the importance of clinical supervision to the students' professional development during their training. Meanwhile, Jacobsson et al. (2012) found the same link with effective supervision in a study of psychology students undergoing psychotherapy training at the University of Stockholm. Both of these studies, as well as one by Robinson et al. (2019), also of psychology students, highlighted the importance of personal growth and transformation for the therapist during the training period as a key factor in their success. No studies assessing the practicum learning that takes place specifically for counselling students were found.

Literature Review Summary

As described above, this review identified significant gaps in the literature in relation to articulating the journey to become a counsellor. Existing research focuses on helping professions other than counselling and, in any case, has not explored the experience of transitioning into these helping professions. No research was found that explores the lived experience of becoming a counsellor.

Aim

The aim of this study was to investigate the transition from postgraduate counselling student to working counsellor. It was intended that the focus on the transitional experience itself could provide useful information for stakeholders holding key roles in such transitions—specifically, students, academic institutions, professional bodies, and employers of counsellors within Australia. It is hoped that learning what has been beneficial to recently transitioned early career counsellors will be of ongoing benefit to those stakeholders, as well as to current and future postgraduate counselling students who intend to work as counsellors.

Design

Research Paradigm and Methodology

A qualitative, phenomenological research approach was chosen to allow deep exploration of participants' lived experience of their transition from student to counsellor (Bryman, 2016) and to enable them to disclose their thoughts and feelings without the limitations of a prescriptive survey (Silverman, 2016).

While influenced by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), in that it searched for a shared perspective of the phenomenon being researched (Larkin et al., 2019), this research design diverged from a purist IPA approach in several respects. This study placed no limit on size and, indeed, included nine respondents, each of whom was interviewed once. IPA research typically aims to keep the sample size smaller—often with as few as three participants—and may interview each person several times (Eatough & Smith, 2017). IPA increasingly utilises multi-modal data collection, such as focus groups in addition to semi-structured interviews (Palmer et al., 2010), whereas this study relied solely on one-on-one interviews. Similar to the approach of IPA, this research sought a level of homogeneity among participants to investigate a shared phenomenon—transitioning from postgraduate student to working counsellor. However, it did not go so far as to include only participants from the same academic program, or who worked in the same organisation.

Data analysis was thematic and therefore more akin to grounded theory, although it did not rigidly follow every aspect of that methodology. Consistent with grounded theory, coding began as soon as the transcripts were complete, and most of the coding nodes emerged from the data as they were analysed (Belgrave & Charmaz, 2012). It should be noted, however, that some of the nodes were preconceived in a manner more consistent with qualitative research than pure grounded theory (Bryman, 2016). The coding itself followed the principles of grounded theory: beginning with open coding to categorise the data, continuing to axial coding to identify connections, and concluding with selective coding, which determined the themes (McCann & Polacsek, 2018).

Trustworthiness

While the majority of counselling researchers agree that trustworthiness is crucial, fewer agree regarding what actually constitutes trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Leung, 2015). Guba and Lincoln (1994) defined specific criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity to elucidate trustworthiness. However, Connelly (2016) suggested not all of these criteria are relevant to all types of studies. Morrow (2005) argued that the particular research paradigm, for example, constructivist versus postmodern, should guide the researcher on their approach to ensuring a quality study. For this research, Connelly's (2016) simplified description of trustworthiness—being the degree of confidence in the data, its interpretation, and the methods used—has been most instructive.

The intent of this research has been to gain deep insight into the human experience of participants, rather than to quantify a specific result, deduce an outcome, or prove a particular hypothesis (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative studies do not aim to achieve repeatability (Maxwell, 2013) nor generalise to a broader population (Bryman, 2016). This project is no different in this regard.

Method

Participants

Since this research sought to investigate the experience of transitioning from postgraduate counselling student to working counsellor, the first criterion was that participants must hold a postgraduate qualification in counselling. To assist with gathering more recent, and ideally more vivid and specific, memories of their transition, participants were sought who had completed their qualification between one and five years ago. No specific period of transition is defined by the Australian Counselling Association (ACA) or the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA), and a transition will vary from person to person. Therefore, a criterion of having worked as a counsellor for at least one year was set. This was chosen because it is beyond a typical probation period of three to six months that would be set by an employer, which is used to establish whether performance is acceptable. Finally, because this study took place in Australia, and because the stakeholders included Australian academic institutions, professional bodies, and employers, the final two criteria were that participants had completed their postgraduate studies within Australia and had worked for at least one year as counsellors in Australia.

Participants varied in age from mid-20s to mid-60s. For some, counselling was their first career, while others had made a mid-career or late-career change to become a counsellor. Several participants were undertaking further study in counselling or psychology. The final cohort of participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Key Features of Participants

Pseudonym	First career?	Employer type
Andre	Yes	Counselling organisation
Catherine	Yes	Counselling organisation
Judith	Yes	Non-counselling
Lucy	No	Counselling organisation
Mary	No	Private practice
Paulina	No	Private practice
Sheridan	Yes	Non-counselling
Stuart	No	Non-counselling

| Vanessa | No | Private practice |

Materials

Advertisements, a participant information statement, a consent form, and a debriefing schedule were developed. The information statement provided full details of the research, including that interviews were to be recorded via Zoom, and an explanation of the confidentiality, anonymity, and security of the participants' information (Silverman, 2016). An interview schedule (Appendix) was developed consisting of prompt questions for the semi-structured interviews, which focused on three areas:

1. the participant's first job
2. the support the participant had received as a new counsellor
3. the participant's recollections of their first months in the profession

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

The core principle of conducting ethical psychological research is to minimise harm to the participants and to the researcher (Boyle & Gamble, 2014). Research participants were recruited using two sampling approaches—purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The research pages of PACFA and ACA were utilised to promote participation in this research, and advertisements were placed on various counselling, psychotherapy, and mental health LinkedIn and Facebook pages.

A participant information statement and consent form were sent to respondents who met the inclusion criteria for their consideration. All participants entered the research voluntarily, and no interviews were conducted with anyone who had a relationship to the researcher (Maxwell, 2013). Signed consent forms were received from each participant before their interview commenced.

Transcription was performed by a professional research company and was subject to a confidentiality agreement. Prior to member checking, the transcribed interviews were anonymised and any other identifying terms such as the name of employers were removed. All participants received their interview transcripts and were invited to review and make any corrections within a 2-week time frame.

Data Analysis

Utilising an approach heavily influenced by Strauss and Corbin's application of grounded theory (as cited in Bryman, 2016), the interview transcripts were iteratively coded. The first step was to use open coding to classify data into a long list of categories (Silverman, 2016), which evolved as the research interviews progressed. Once the interviews were complete, axial coding was used to draw connections between the categories, followed

by selective coding to group these categories into central themes (Bryman, 2016). This allowed more than 50 initial codes to be iteratively distilled into three key themes, with seven subthemes, as illustrated in Table 2. Thematic analysis was specifically chosen for this study because it aligns well with the qualitative research method by allowing the voices of participants to be central and to provide an evidence base for the discussion.

Results

Table 2. Key Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. The launching pad	1.1 Life experience
	1.2 The academic experience
	1.3 Entry to the profession
2. Safeguards	2.1 Support mechanisms
	2.2 Supervision
3. Embracing the profession	3.1 Building capability
	3.2 Working as a counsellor

Theme 1—The Launching Pad

As participants transitioned into their counselling careers, each brought with them a set of experiences, some unique and personal, some shared, and some shaped by their earliest steps in practicum placement. Given the diverse life tracks these participants had taken, it would not be practical in this research to describe every single event that might have shaped their experience. Therefore, the term "launching pad" was devised to capture everything participants described as being relevant experiences in their lives leading up to the day they began working as counsellors—in other words, the preparatory experiences that occurred prior to participants launching themselves into the profession. The launching pad was divided into three subthemes: life experience, academic experience, and entry to the profession.

Subtheme 1.1—Life Experience

Participants travelled different paths to their counselling careers. For three, counselling was their first career after leaving school, and their career choices were influenced by events in their schooling and tertiary education. Andre noticed in high school that many of his friends were dealing with personal issues and needed support: "I really wanted to help, but I couldn't help them myself". He became a bridge to the school counsellor, giving friends the courage to seek professional help, and when he finished school, he decided to become a counsellor himself. Catherine had planned a career as an organisational psychologist but changed her path after studying a grief and loss elective unit at university: "it really opened my eyes to how helpful it can be to just share that space with someone going through a traumatic event".

Others made the transition to counselling later in life, although for two participants counselling was not too far removed from their previous career. Vanessa described her decision to change careers as resulting from "a mid-life crisis in my 40s". She had worked in the health industry her whole life, most recently as a midwife, and found herself increasingly drawn, "not so much to labour, but to supporting women through things like breastfeeding and parenting". When someone suggested she should undertake that part of the job exclusively, she began the counselling study to make the transition. Paulina, who had had a long and successful corporate career, found herself "completely burnt out working [in that corporate environment] five days a week". After a break, she began coaching corporate leaders and quickly realised "most of my clients were anxious perfectionists". She decided she needed a greater range of skills to support them and embarked on a Master of Counselling soon after.

Subtheme 1.2—The Academic Experience

Participants generally reflected positively on their academic experiences and felt their course content set them up well for working with clients. Stuart said he "couldn't fault it—I think they did everything they could to get us ready". Lucy commented, "lecturers were great at giving us confidence by telling us they could see we were ready to start working with clients". Others felt that the range of theories and modalities taught gave them an excellent foundation on which to build their own counselling approach.

The strongest negative reflection about the academic experience came exclusively, but consistently, from those who later established private counselling practices, and it is difficult to overstate the strength of these respondents' concerns. All three of these participants wished the institution had provided them with considerably more information about building a practice and, in particular, the challenges of the Medicare[2] system. Vanessa went as far as to state that "it's unethical for universities to run a counselling program knowing that counsellors are not eligible [to allow their clients to claim] for Medicare rebates". Judith stated her "biggest gripe" about her university program was that "no one ever told us how hard it is to make a living in private practice". Two of these participants felt this information, which might be considered career guidance, should have been provided to them before their institution accepted their enrolment, and one even wondered aloud whether she might have made a different career choice as a result.

Subtheme 1.3—Entry to the Profession

A key observation from this study has been the importance of each participant's practicum placement in terms of their entry into the profession. Of the nine respondents, eight took their first paid counselling job in the same organisation, or sector, in which they had completed their placement. "To say my placement experience came in handy in getting my first job would be an understatement", is how Catherine described it. Sheridan commented, "my placement launched me straight into the job that I'm still in", and Judith explained, "about four months into it [my placement] they offered me a position for when it [my placement] finished". The importance of the practicum placement to their first counselling job was apparent, despite most participants admitting they had not formed a clear idea of the sector in which they wished to work before starting their placement. They further admitted they had not put too much thought into where they would undertake their placement. For some, their academic institution took complete control of the placement and did not ask students what type of counselling work they would prefer to do. Nevertheless, those respondents were just as likely to take their first job based on that placement.

Theme 2—Safeguards

The term "safeguards" was chosen to represent the range of mechanisms participants described that kept them professionally protected while they were building their experience working as counsellors. Research participants described the importance of both formal and informal support mechanisms to buttress their transition into the profession. These included line management within their organisation, work colleagues, members of their academic cohort, and formal counselling supervision. Given its prevalence in the interviews, formal supervision became a subtheme of its own, while other pillars were grouped together into the subtheme transitional support mechanisms.

Subtheme 2.1—Transitional Support Mechanisms

Participants who worked in organisations consistently viewed their line manager as an important support as they began to work with clients. For some, including Sheridan, their manager was also a counsellor and therefore able to provide professional guidance: "we had a counselling team manager who still saw clients, so that was really helpful for me". For Catherine, however, her management support was limited to "pretty much just listening and encouraging me, because he came from a different work background and had no clinical or counselling experience". Nevertheless, she described this management support as valuable. Work colleagues were also frequently mentioned as helpful support. Sheridan's employer had several counsellors on the staff, and Sheridan found their willingness to share their experience extremely valuable: "I guess for the first month or so I would run ideas by them all the time". Lucy also found counselling colleagues were helpful, for example, by "just validating my experience, because they'd all been through the same stuff". Meanwhile Andre, despite being the only counsellor in the organisation,

was part of a larger client wellbeing team and found this valuable "because other people with different backgrounds had different perspectives on the clients, which helped me think through how best to support them".

The value in maintaining a connection with their academic cohorts to support their early transition into the sector emerged for many participants, although it was quite differently described. Vanessa experienced this more as general support: "we often have a cuppa together and a chinwag and support each other". Sheridan viewed it similarly: "I guess we just catch up and see how our jobs are going and what our organisations are like". Meanwhile, Judith recalled the relationships as being much deeper and more impactful for her: "I think we were just all able to be vulnerable and open and share our fears. We really did walk alongside each other." For Lucy, the value was in "talking about cases", for example, "we talked about whatever people were seeing at the time—that couple, or this person, and how we were approaching the sessions". Despite the varied reflections on the specific benefits of maintaining connections with their fellow students, everyone who raised this felt it had helped their transition, even if only for a short time. Some respondents also commented that they regretted not keeping in touch for longer, or at all.

Subtheme 2.2—Supervision

The importance of clinical supervision in supporting the transition into the profession was a standout aspect of this study, with every participant raising it. Some had access to clinical supervision directly through their employer, although this was not always described as ideal. Others needed to seek and pay for their own supervision. Andre described himself as a "supervision junkie", regularly participating in "one-on-one and group supervision both inside and outside my workplace", saying it helped him enormously to grow as a counsellor at the beginning. Mary described her supervisor as "just so excellent and supportive. I have much respect for her—she's been on my journey with me for the past four years". She discussed how valuable it was that her supervisor was able to adapt the support as her counselling experience grew, "providing very different guidance at the beginning than she does now". Judith articulated the value of supervision for her as being both the scheduled and the unscheduled, emphasising the importance of "just grabbing opportunities to have those quick sitdowns when a crisis happened".

While Sheridan accessed supervision within her organisation, she also sought external supervision: "I guess at the beginning I decided I should seek external supervision to get that additional perspective". Over time, Sheridan maintained that and felt she "can be more open with someone outside my employer—I just feel like there's more trust". Catherine knew "right from day one that it was important to find a supervisor with the right fit". She had been with her chosen supervisor ever since and credited them enormously for her own growth: "I think that support was so critical, I don't think I would be the same counsellor, or even the same person, I am today without it".

For Mary, Paulina, and Vanessa running their own practices, supervision had been more challenging to find and maintain, but no less important. Paulina raised her early challenges in accessing supervision: "there didn't seem to be a lot of people providing supervision at a reasonable rate in my city". She did eventually find good supervision, although the supervisor had recently relocated and Paulina was continuing via Zoom rather than face the daunting prospect of beginning her search again. When Mary began in the profession, she wanted a supervisor with broad experience: "I didn't need someone with a particular way of thinking; I needed somebody who had done lots of things and could guide me—and also be on my side". This influenced her own counselling style, which she described as probably more eclectic than integrative. Vanessa deliberately chose a supervisor who also ran his own practice. In addition to clinical supervision, "he was able to help me with certain aspects of the business, things I'd never thought of". Vanessa credits some of her business choices, and success, to that guidance. The financial pressure of having to pay for supervision themselves from day one while slowly building the income from their practice was noted as an additional challenge to maintaining supervision.

Theme 3—Embracing the Profession

Participants variously described that the process of becoming a counsellor was not as clear cut as acquiring counselling techniques during tertiary education and then simply applying them from day one on the job. They described a definite learning curve along two distinct paths: their need to build the technical skills required to counsel clients and their understanding of what it was like to work in the counselling profession. The idea of "embracing the profession", rather than merely working in the profession, aptly describes this theme.

Subtheme 3.1—Building Capability

Many participants described their sense of fear and uncertainty in the early days of seeing clients, despite having mastered plenty of academic content and successfully completing their placement. Andre felt he had been "20%, wait, no 10%!" prepared for his first clients. Catherine similarly said, "I was just so nervous . . . you know, lots of imposter syndrome". She felt it had been "maybe three months until I had a good level of confidence". Likewise, Paulina questioned herself: "What issues are they going to come with? What tools will I use?" In addition, because she had opened her own practice, Paulina had asked herself from day one, "How am I going to add value in the first session so that they want to come back and are happy to pay me?"

Despite these initial nerves, interviewees generally felt they had built their skills on the job quite quickly. For example, Lucy commented, "I was always confident I'd find a style that worked for me and that didn't take too long" [for her to find]. Sheridan had been advised by a colleague very early in her transition that, if she found herself in a tricky place with a client, she should "just focus on being attentive, just really listening, and the next step will take care of itself". She found that advice extremely helpful in the early stages, and she worried less about becoming stuck with a client. Stuart also received early advice to

"embrace the discomfort and enjoy the journey", which he found calming when he was unsure about how to proceed with a client. Others described using professional development programs to build their skills quickly at the beginning. Paulina mentioned seeking development programs from around the world to build the specific set of skills she desired. Others, like Mary and Sheridan, attended workshops run by professional associations such as PACFA and ACA.

Subtheme 3.2—Working as a Counsellor

Regarding working as a counsellor, responses differed markedly between those working for organisations and those in private practice. For employees like Sheridan and Andre, their non-clinical reflections on their early days working in a counselling organisation concerned such matters as "getting used to office politics" and "learning how to meet my KPIs [Key Performance Indicators]". Judith commented that she watched her boss "to learn how to get things done and bypass the bureaucracy".

Others commented on specific aspects related to their sector, with Lucy stating, "I had to learn all the wrap-around services that exist in the AOD [Alcohol and Other Drugs] sector", and Judith noting, "two Indigenous people might look like they have similar cultural backgrounds, but if one has spent almost all their life remote and the other is urban, that really changes things and you've got to learn that fast". Stuart mentioned that he "never knew he'd have to do a referral to another service" until someone explained this to him.

Participants who had established private practices offered notably different observations. Early in our interviews Vanessa, Mary, and Paulina raised feelings of frustration with office administration activities, for example, "setting up the accounting stuff", "managing when the internet breaks down", and "dealing with cancellations and chasing invoices". Later, both Vanessa and Paulina discussed their frustrations with the leading professional associations. For example, Vanessa questioned the effectiveness of the associations' lobbying to obtain Medicare coverage for counselling. Paulina elaborated, "I don't think [the associations] do anything to educate the market about the role of a counsellor". Moreover, both were critical of the lack of support in terms of advice on how to market and build a practice. They were divided regarding whether this should be a responsibility solely of the professional associations or should be shared by the academic institutions. Regardless, they described feeling isolated and unsupported in terms of setting up and building a counselling practice.

Discussion

This study investigated the experience of those transitioning from postgraduate student to working counsellor. The findings reveal that, while many factors contribute to the early career experiences of counsellors, these can be grouped into three themes. Theme 1, "the launching pad", represents the journey prior to working as a counsellor. Theme 2, "safeguards", describes the support and protection available once working as a

counsellor. Theme 3, "embracing the profession", refers to the need to embrace the counselling profession once working in it. Within these themes, some findings are supported by the existing literature and others are new.

The most obvious parallel with existing research is the importance of clinical supervision. Hill et al. (2007) and Jacobsson et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of supervision for the early career development of doctoral psychotherapy students in their studies. In this study, all participants described the pivotal role their own clinical supervision played in their transition to working as counsellors. Despite this, comparatively few participants actively sought their own supervisor but rather chose to accept whoever was assigned to them, and none sought a better supervisor over time, even though several described their supervision as being less than ideal.

The other important link to the literature is the significance of personal and professional development to an early career counsellor. Hill et al. (2007), Jacobsson et al. (2012), and Robinson et al. (2019) all found that doctoral psychotherapy students described their personal and professional growth as a key factor in their early career success. This study supported this finding, with participants reflecting positively on the professional benefits they derived from on-the-job learning.

Regarding practicum placements, it should be noted that counselling in Australia is a self-regulated profession. Therefore, many counsellors rely on their membership of a professional association such as PACFA or ACA to demonstrate to clients that they are appropriately accredited. Since practicum placements are mandated by PACFA and ACA for accredited academic courses, it seems evident that these major professional bodies recognise the importance of placements to the development of early career counsellors. However, my university placement coordinator, several of my counselling lecturers and former classmates, as well as participants in this study have variously described how difficult it is to find sufficient placements for counselling students and, therefore, how little choice is often available for students. The significance of participants' practicum placements to their early employment choices as a counsellor, and the frequency with which placements led directly to employment following graduation, was unexpected. Given this frequency, and the often random allocation of placements reported, participants would have appreciated a deeper understanding of the considerations behind placement assignments and greater input into that process. It is acknowledged by the author, however, that finding sufficient placements each year for tertiary students is an ongoing challenge and that the current model for finding placements is not ideal in this regard.

Participants identified several categories of people who assisted their transition into the counselling profession. It was unsurprising to find managers and work colleagues on this list, not least because of their daily proximity to a new counsellor. As with supervision though, it was surprising how few participants reported changing jobs to find more supportive management or colleagues, even though several described their work environments as unsupportive. It is possible that early career counsellors do not feel

empowered to change jobs until they have gained more experience, or perhaps an apparent reluctance to change jobs rather reflects a recognition that finding a good manager and a supportive workplace is not easy.

The importance to participants of maintaining a connection with their academic cohort during the early transitional period is noteworthy, with several respondents identifying those connections as a strong supportive factor in their transition into counselling. While for most, the importance of these relationships faded relatively quickly, the initial support was highly valued.

This study also highlights the challenges that early career counsellors face when establishing their own practice. While all participants who chose to set up their own practice felt that was the right decision for them, they also felt largely unsupported in doing so. Some pointed to their academic institutions, suggesting more guidance should have been provided about starting a counselling practice before, and during, their studies. Others felt the professional bodies could provide more support to those building a practice. This desire to apportion blame reflects the intense frustration these respondents experienced. Participants particularly despaired that access to Medicare funding for counselling clients had been discussed for many years, yet not achieved.[3] All expressed that their experience of establishing a counselling practice was more difficult than they had expected. Perhaps the through line connecting these findings from private practice counsellors is that none of the issues is new. Starting a new business, in any profession, has its challenges, and significant investigation is generally required to ensure a new business is successful—presumably even more so following a career change. The issue of Medicare funding for counsellors has been a topic of discussion for more than 10 years. While participants felt that more information and support should have been available to them, it is also worth considering whether they made the decision to study counselling before they had fully investigated the challenges involved in building a counselling practice.

Future Research

Further investigation into the assignment of students' practicum placements is suggested. It is acknowledged by the author that placements are difficult to find and that academic institutions often struggle to source enough placements for their students. However, given both the frequency with which these placements lead to ongoing employment and the lack of reported structure in determining where these placements occur, practicum placements are an important issue for new counsellors. Professions such as dentistry, clinical psychology, and medicine, all of which manage placements at scale, could provide models from which to learn, although they are all highly regulated professions and the ability to transfer learnings should not simply be assumed.

While this study did not investigate in detail the backgrounds of participants, it could be instructive to understand the types of life experiences, or previous careers, that might support a successful transition into counselling. This understanding may be particularly

important given the expected growth in mental health service provision in Australia (Hayes, 2019).

Also relevant to the expected growth in demand for counselling services are the experiences of early career counsellors establishing their own practices. This area may benefit from specific investigation, in particular how to support non-clinical aspects, such as building and marketing a practice and navigating through the Medicare and mental health support systems.

Finally, while this study did not exclude anyone who had worked as a counsellor for one year or more but who had since left the profession, no one in that category responded to the advertisements. It is not known how significant an issue counsellors leaving the profession is, but further research to understand why they do so could be valuable.

Conclusion

Graduates' transition into the profession is assisted by the combined support of academic institutions, professional bodies, and employers of counsellors within Australia. Clinical supervision remains critical to the professional development of a counsellor once they are working. Sourcing practicum placements during postgraduate studies that are appropriately tailored to the student and their development is a challenge, and alternative models could be explored. This would necessarily require a joint approach from tertiary institutions, professional bodies, and employers of counsellors.

Gaining a strong understanding of what it is like to work in a profession prior to undertaking relevant tertiary education is critical for any profession, and counselling is no different in this regard. Much information is available; however, in a self-regulated profession such as counselling in Australia, knowing where and how to access reliable information was identified as an issue by participants in this research. One only has to spend a few hours searching counselling-related social media to understand the risk of confusion. Lengthy threads exist, with wildly differing views, in response to questions such as, "What qualification should I get if I want to practise as a counsellor?" or "Can I call myself a psychotherapist if I've done a counselling qualification?" or "Can counsellors see clients with a mental health plan under Medicare?" Stakeholders supporting aspiring counsellors would do well to remain cognisant of the difficulties that those outside the profession may experience in attempting to access consistent, accurate guidance about counselling as a career.

Declarations

The opinions expressed within the content are solely the research participants' and do not reflect the opinions and beliefs of the author.

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Footnotes

[1] Counselling and psychotherapy are not legally regulated titles in Australia. They are professionally regulated by the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) and the Australian Counselling Association (ACA). Members of these associations are required to meet their training standards, which include obtaining an accredited bachelor's or master's degree. The term "counselling psychologist" is also widely used in Australia and is separately regulated for registered psychologists by the Australian Psychological Society. Psychotherapy is a modality of treatment that is used extensively by psychiatrists. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists is responsible for training, educating, and representing psychiatrists in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

[2] Medicare is Australia's universal health insurance scheme. It provides financial support for Australians seeking mental health treatment with psychologists but not, typically, when accessing the same type of support via registered counsellors and psychotherapists.

[3.] Medicare funding for mental health services in Australia, which involves many stakeholders, has a complex history but is beyond the scope of this paper.

Appendix

Interview Schedule

1. Tell me how you became qualified as a counsellor?
2. What was your first job as a counsellor and how did you find it?
3. Just before you started this job, how prepared did you feel?
4. Could you describe what you remember of your first few weeks in the job?
5. How was that first team structured? E.g., did you report to a manager, or was someone assigned to supervise you?
6. How did that person (or those people) support your transition into the profession?
7. Tell me about your first few months in the profession.
8. Tell me about your self-care and when you began to consider it.
9. Looking back, are there things you wish you'd known when you started the job?
10. If you were speaking to a Master of Counselling student, what advice would you give them?

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