

# Connecting with clients: Building therapeutic alliances with people who are incarcerated

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The activity of counselling people within a prison has often been documented as a more “serious” and difficult undertaking than counselling people in the community (Polizzi & Draper, 2010, p. 13). Not only does it involve working with people who have been charged or convicted of breaking the law, many of whom may have committed grave offences, but it also necessitates working within an environment generally regarded as “non-therapeutic” and uncondusive to counselling practice (Huffman, 2006).

In this article, various ways in which prison counsellors attempt to build meaningful and productive working relationships with their clients are discussed, highlighting some of the specific challenges that they often face in doing so. It draws on data collected as part of a doctoral study that described the lived experience of counsellors working in the Western Australian prison system (Denton, 2018). The primary focus here is on issues pertaining to working with incarcerated individuals as a specific client group. The impact of broader contextual factors on the counselling experience is considered in detail in that original research (Denton, 2018).

## Background

The working relationship between client and counsellor, sometimes referred to as the “therapeutic alliance” (Zetzel, 1956, p. 370) or “working alliance” (Greenson, 1965, p. 155), is identified in the literature as the fundamental driver for change in clients and as more important than particular techniques or practice models (Flaskas et al., 2007; Harvey & Smedley, 2010; Ross et al., 2008; Ruch et al., 2010). It has been described as “the beating heart” of counselling practice and as the centre “where minds meet, communication happens, and language and meaning are traded” (Howe, 2009, pp. 195–196). In so doing it also provides the opportunity for the client to gain control, recover hope, build resilience, and develop an increased capacity to cope (Howe, 2009, p. 195).

Critical to the development of a productive therapeutic relationship is the practitioner’s ability “to establish rapport, to be friendly and to make an emotional connection” (Turney, 2010, as cited in Ruch et al., 2010, p. 139). Once trust and cooperation have been established, the focus shifts to problem assessment and intervention and, eventually, to closure (Ivanoff et al., 1994).

In his seminal work on the person-centred approach, Carl Rogers (1961) proposed six conditions necessary to facilitate client growth and change, three of which he regarded as central. These were therapist congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard. Similar therapist-related factors were identified by Gross and Capuzzi (1995) in their review of the counselling literature, along with warmth, immediacy, and their own addition, “cultural awareness”. Importantly, however, although the counsellor is primarily responsible for facilitating the therapeutic process via strategies that reflect these principles, the involvement and commitment of the client is also vital (Gross & Capuzzi 1995; Rogers 1961; Trotter, 2015).

Literature specifically pertaining to the helping relationship within a prison context generally reflects the factors mentioned above. For example, Sun (2013, p. 119) suggests that four key interrelated features are essential: empathy, warmth, genuineness, and withholding judgement. Trotter (2015) identifies similar elements when practitioners are working with involuntary clients such as people who have been incarcerated, with the addition of reflective listening, self-disclosure, humour, and the appropriate use of authority as other important interpersonal skills.

Some research indicates, however, that mandated clients may not respond to qualities such as practitioner warmth, genuineness, and empathy (Ivanoff et al., 1994). Moreover, court-ordered clients such as individuals who have been imprisoned for their offences cannot necessarily be expected to willingly enter or engage in the process of counselling, especially if they are unfamiliar with this type of interaction (Ivanoff et al., 1994). They may perceive contact with practitioners as unwanted intrusions into their lives, particularly if they do not consider they need the help that the mandating agent perceives that they do, or are not prepared to acknowledge or, where appropriate, accept responsibility for addressing personal issues or behaviours (Elliott & Schrink, 2009).

An additional challenge faced by prison counsellors is that their clients often have extensive histories of trust violations and negative experiences with welfare professionals. They may view counsellors with distrust and suspicion, as authority figures who are part of a system with its own agenda (Polizzi & Draper, 2010), and thus may have no interest in or motivation to participate in counselling (Cooper et al., 2003; Dewbery Rooney & Blakey, 2009; Kroll, 2010). If they do engage, a period of intense “testing out” of the practitioner frequently occurs (Kroll, 2010).

Finding appropriate ways of overcoming issues such as those outlined is frequently compounded by the fact that the population with which prison counsellors work can be extremely diverse. Counsellors are required to accept all clients assigned to them. This may include individuals charged or convicted of any number of offences, such as murder, rape, and child abuse, and/or who have special needs such as severe mental illness, developmental disabilities, or substance abuse problems (Elliott & Schrink, 2009). Further, caseloads may comprise male and female clients from a range of nationalities and cultural backgrounds, each of whom brings distinct characteristics, motivations, and

perceptions to the relationship. Language-related issues, the relevance of “standard” counselling techniques, and the need to respect and understand various cultural norms must also be taken into account (Elliott & Schrink, 2009).

## **The Context**

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In Western Australia, there are 17 diverse prisons across the state, nine of which are based in the metropolitan area and eight in regional areas. All are the responsibility of the Western Australian government Department of Justice. The prisons accommodate either adult men or women, or both, although the vast majority (90%) of those incarcerated are men, of whom more than a third (38%) are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people (Department of Corrective Services, 2017).

Within each prison, two broad divisions, Adult Custodial Operations and Offender Services, are responsible for addressing the dual objectives of security and rehabilitation respectively, although there is some overlap between these divisions in terms of people’s various responsibilities. At the time of the doctoral study, the Prison Counselling Service (renamed the Psychological Health Service (PHS) in 2018) was a subsection within the Offender Services division, with counsellors based in all but one of the 17 prisons.

Although there have been some structural realignments and nomenclature changes within the Department in recent years, the counselling role has remained consistent in terms of its required focus—specifically, to treat individuals suffering acute and severe psychosocial problems related to their incarceration and who are at potential risk of self-harm or suicide. However, at the time the interviews were conducted, the role in some (primarily regional) prisons extended beyond counselling per se and included duties such as “treatment assessments” to determine a client’s program treatment needs, and/or facilitation of group treatment programs. Contact with clients requiring individual counselling may range from a brief one-off session (e.g., risk assessment) to a longer-term intervention, although opportunities for the latter may also be constrained by factors such as the prison setting in which practitioners are based and limited staff resources.

## **Method**

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As stated, the study reported here draws on data collected as part of a broader research study that explored the lived experience of prison counsellors in Western Australia. The specific question for that research was: How do practitioners describe and make sense of their lived experience of working in a prison setting? It adopted a qualitative methodology incorporating a combined framework of existentialism and interpretivism. Existentialism is a philosophy of lived experience and one that facilitates the exploration of “beingness” in the world and the existentialist challenges that people face (Prochaska, 1979; Thompson, 2010). The interpretivist framework highlights the centrality of language and the words available for making sense in terms of “knowing and being” in the world (Lefevre et al., 2008).

Data were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews using a number of key prompts in order to facilitate discussion. All 50 Western Australian prison counselling service staff were invited via letter to participate, with 36 agreeing to contribute. They included 14 social workers and 22 psychologists from a range of nationalities, ages, and levels of experience. Twenty-four participants worked in metropolitan prisons and 12 in regional prisons. Several participants had worked in multiple prisons.

Interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of participants and later transcribed. For the purposes of the study described in this paper, the transcripts were first reviewed for responses and comments related to the question “How do you form a relationship with a prisoner [*sic*]?” An electronic search using keywords such as “relationship”, “alliance”, “connection”, and “rapport” was then conducted in order to identify other comments associated with the establishment of a therapeutic alliance within the prison context and all relevant data entered into a new electronic file, ready for further analysis. A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was then established to facilitate the organisation of data. This involved a process of initial coding followed by further refinement and categorisation to identify the most prevalent themes.

Ethics approval for the doctoral study was granted by the University of Western Australia’s Human Research Ethics Committee, and the research subsequently approved by the Department of Corrective Services, Research and Evaluation Committee (now known as the Department of Justice Research Application and Advisory Committee (RAAC)). Participant privacy and confidentiality were addressed via a thorough informed consent process, and anonymity maintained throughout the research. The latter included ensuring that no identifying information such as a participant’s name or prison location was maintained on either the audio recordings or transcripts or included in the final research thesis.

## Findings

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Analysis of the data pertaining to the present study revealed four interrelated themes or “practice approaches”. One of the most prevalent was the importance of gaining a client’s trust. In addition, three practice-related skills emerged as particularly important. These were listening, authenticity, and a non-judgemental attitude. The following discusses how counsellors attempt to manage the complexities of their task with a focus on the four above-mentioned themes.

## Establishing Trust

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Despite the potential challenges involved, developing trust was generally regarded as pivotal to the establishment of a genuine and effective therapeutic alliance with an individual experiencing incarceration and a process that should commence from the time of the first contact with a client. Participants identified basic social formalities and gestures such as introducing themselves and shaking their client’s hand at the time of the initial meeting as an important part of the process:

I look them in the eye when I meet them, I shake their hand, I call them by their first name and then when we go into the interview room . . . I ask them how they would like me to address them, are they happy with me using their first name.

Clarifying the parameters of the counselling exchange in terms of what could or could not remain confidential between the counsellor and the client and of what the Prison Counselling Service was able to provide was also described as a crucial part of the first meeting and as essential to the development of trust. This included informing the client that counsellors were duty bound to advise the relevant authorities of any disclosures the client should make regarding actual risk to self or others, past offences committed for which they had not been charged, or behaviour that could compromise prison security. A client's lack of clarity about what the counselling role specifically involved was also recognised as placing counsellors in potentially threatening situations, as illustrated by the following example:

. . . the offender [*sic*] was obviously very distressed . . . he was recently imprisoned, and he was in tears and [saying] how sad his situation [was] and he just needs to ring his family to sort this out . . . I basically referred him to all the right places and how to go about getting a phone call . . . He just looked up at me and said, "but you've got a phone right there, just pick up the phone and call for me". [I said] that's not my role, I can't make phone calls on behalf of prisoners [*sic*]. And he just got bigger, and his face turned red and his voice got so loud and he just yelled . . . and I actually at that point thought he was going to hit me or attack me.

A number of counsellors recognised that their clients were often highly mistrustful of anyone associated with "welfare" services because of their past experiences with them:

I think there are certainly guys that are suspicious of us because they've had a bad experience . . . maybe through school, or through the justice or court system or whatever, [the helping professionals] have not listened to them, [have] talked to them and then written, "these are his problems and blah, blah, blah", and never actually offered them any help, or have labelled them.

In such cases, counsellors often needed to spend extra time trying to allay a client's fears (e.g., "Okay I'll make sure I do that differently—so tell me more about why you didn't like that experience?").

Similarly, a further challenge identified was counsellors being regarded as part of the system, as “one of them” or as “a screw in civvies”. This perception was said to create suspicion among those who were incarcerated as to where the information they disclosed during counselling sessions might go. In some instances, they sought to determine counsellor “trustworthiness” and credibility via the setting of “little tests”.

They’d drop little things in . . . things that are considered, not contraband as such, but if they saw someone tattooing in their unit and whether or not I’d take that information anywhere and whether they’d get in trouble for that information. So, whether or not I was trustworthy enough to continue coming to see me.

Situations such as this placed counsellors in a difficult position in terms of the development of trust. They needed to demonstrate that they would not “collude” with clients regarding any behaviour that contravened prison regulations, while not wanting to negatively impact the working relationship.

Counsellor honesty and transparency were regarded as crucial to overcoming some of the difficulties associated with the trust-building process. Offering to show clients notes being written during counselling sessions was described as one strategy for enabling this process—for example, “Does that sound right to you, what you’ve just said to me?” and “If you’re really worried about it, you can read my notes”. Inviting them to confirm whether they agreed with the suggested focus of counselling sessions was another important part of developing the working alliance (“These are some of the areas that I’ve picked up on. I’m happy for you to tell me that I’m wrong”).

Establishing a collaborative working relationship with custodial staff was also identified as an important part of the trust-building process, albeit indirectly. This aspect was about ensuring that certain protective mechanisms within the prison were put in place so that clients learnt that what counsellors said they were going to do actually happened. By way of example, one counsellor described his experience of working with a severely disturbed male client. This individual had a history of chronic self-harm, including setting fire to his own head. The counsellor, in consultation with the assistant superintendent, set in place a re-education plan which involved employing a different management strategy for this individual. This was based on an agreement with the client that he would be allowed certain “privileges” provided he “behaved” himself in the prison unit. It included adjusting his weekly gratuities (normally used to pay off fines he had accrued while in prison) so that he had sufficient money left for cigarettes rather than threatening others for them.

For this counsellor, an indication that trust was developing was when the client invited him to sit outside with him in the prison unit—“so he’d now invited me into his space . . . we sat out the back . . . and had a chat”. He also identified being able to work with this individual consistently for over a year as having been pivotal to the development of a genuine trusting relationship.

Gaining the trust of individuals from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often required practitioners to adopt more flexible, creative approaches. For example, one counsellor described her way of connecting with First Nations women who were incarcerated as follows:

We sometimes go into their unit and just have a bit of a talk to some of the women around and they get to know you and once they get to know your face they'll start being drawn to you a bit more, or when they're sitting and doing beadwork, you'll go across, "Oh, that's beautiful. What are you busy making? Will you teach me sometime? I'm really kind of useless at doing this kind of stuff. By the way, do you want to come and see me sometime next week just so that I can see how you're travelling?" So it's that type of approach.

Building a trusting relationship with clients who spoke little or no English or who by virtue of their cultural backgrounds were unfamiliar with the notion of counselling (or even imprisonment, as in the case of many First Nations people from traditional backgrounds) was, however, acknowledged as being much more difficult. Working through interpreters, particularly if they could only be accessed by phone, as in a number of regional prisons, was sometimes thought to impede rather than facilitate the trust-building process. Accessing professional interpreters who spoke the same dialect as a client was also identified as an issue. Although recognised as less than ideal, some counsellors chose to enlist the help of other individuals who were incarcerated, at least in the initial stages, in order to establish a basic level of trust. As one participant said:

They're not really like a proficient interpreter because . . . their language skills are also diverse. But it's the best that you've got. So generally, it would be enlisting the help of another prisoner [*sic*] that comes from the same region and could speak the same tongue . . . and the level of the interaction is much . . . simpler [with questions like] . . . "Are you okay? . . . Is there anything that you need?"

In cases where clients were unfamiliar with the notion of counselling, one approach identified was asking a simple introductory question such as "Do you know what counselling is?" and then providing an explanation, as needed. Others recommended slowing the process down "to create some stillness for the conversation to happen". Sensitivity and adherence to certain cultural formalities such as positioning of chairs to avoid direct eye contact if appropriate and avoiding a direct questioning approach were also frequently emphasised as integral to the development of trust.

Clients with unmanaged mental health issues who were perceived as unpredictable and easily provoked represented a further challenge and required counsellors to be patient and mindful of their communication style to avoid inadvertently inciting a hostile response and thus harming the trust-building process.

## The Importance of Listening

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I've never had anyone listen like you did. You seem like you actually give a shit.

– *Client feedback to counsellor*

Listening was identified as a crucial component of the therapeutic alliance when working with people who are incarcerated, many of whom were perceived as having had limited experience of anyone genuinely interested in listening to them or, indeed, of ever having had a healthy relationship with another person.

It's more about mostly listening . . . and I think that's the most important thing. They want to be heard. If you don't give them that opportunity, then you're dismissing them like everybody else does.

Listening was regarded as particularly relevant given that their clients were accustomed to being continuously told what to do by custodial staff.

Here they get talked at. "Get your laundry. Get your milk". No one ever says, "So, what's it like for you?" A prison officer would never ask that question. So they're always being talked at, directed. "Give us your pass. Where are you going? Why are you wearing headphones going to the gym? Put your coat on. You're not allowed to leave the unit with just a singlet". There's always orders and directions.

To facilitate active listening, counsellors highlighted factors such as responding appropriately, being mindful of non-verbal cues, and validating clients' experiences (e.g., "mm-mm, yep, well that sounds challenging") as crucial. Via strategies such as direct eye contact if culturally appropriate and showing complete interest in what their clients had to say, regardless of the content, counsellors sought to instil a sense of worth and show them that they valued the information that clients were prepared to disclose. Rarely interjecting and allowing clients to take their time and just "be" if they did not wish to talk were other ways in which counsellors gave them the space to relax and feel comfortable: "It's just about being there and being genuine, being present, being a listener".



However, and in addition to contextual factors such as inadequate soundproofing of counselling rooms or the presence of prison officers in some sessions, the process of listening in a prison environment was acknowledged as highly demanding at times. Working with clients identified as having an ongoing risk of suicide, for example, meant that counsellors had to metaphorically “split themselves in two”—to remain as present as possible during the interaction yet at the same time to listen intently in order to fulfil their primary role obligations related to risk assessment (“What does that tell me? What will I do with that?”). These demands were compounded by fears of a coronial inquiry should a death in custody occur, and potential media scrutiny of the Department.

I’m very conscious when I’m doing my documentation and when I’m seeing a client, doing a risk assessment, that despite what I’ve thought I could be wrong and they could kill themselves and I could be at a coroner’s again.

Listening when counselling individuals who were unlikely to ever be released from prison (generally referred to as “lifers”) was identified by several practitioners as often being a difficult process to manage knowing that the future for this particular cohort was bleak.

So I just sit with him and let him talk and try and give him some human interaction. I will probably raise questions from time to time about the future . . . it’s possible that he could die in prison—so it’s quite delicate really.

Others spoke of feeling “inspired” and “amazed” by some clients sentenced to life imprisonment who, despite their circumstances, demonstrated resilience and a positive attitude. The listening process in this context was about providing encouragement and validation as to how these individuals maintained their peace of mind and acceptance of their situation. It was also about helping those who grappled with the enormity of what they had done to reframe their perceptions of themselves.

## **Authenticity**

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Counsellors perceived their clients as expert at detecting whether they were genuine or not (“They’ll see straight through you”; “They see in your eyes if you are full of shit”). This ability was often attributed to many clients having become hypervigilant as a result of childhood abuse and/or of having spent lengthy periods being incarcerated and developing a “survival mode” mentality.

Transparency and naming things in the moment were identified by several participants as one means of managing these situations—for example, apologising when they were struggling to maintain focus during a session, or describing their perception of their relationship with the client (“I feel like I have to prove myself to you”; “Do I need to be scared of you?”). Making simple statements such as “I’m not going to lie to you” or asking clients who seemed unmotivated or ambivalent what they were hoping to gain from the interaction were other strategies sometimes employed.

Several participants said that revealing their “personhood” to clients, for example through tears or laughter, was another way of indicating their genuineness and hence of developing the relationship. One counsellor described how when working with a long-term client who she suspected of harbouring suicidal thoughts, her genuine use of self and disclosure that he had affected her life had not only facilitated a greater sense of connection between them but also the client’s sense of his own self-worth.

I said “if I came to work on Monday and you weren’t here and you’d killed yourself, I’d be very upset” and I had this reaction and I actually . . . tears went down my cheek . . . I think he was floored. Then he said: “I feel really guilty for making you cry” . . . and he came back the next session and said, “It was the most beautiful thing to see that happen . . . I didn’t realise that somebody cared that much”.

Sharing some personal information about themselves was a further strategy counsellors frequently employed in order to facilitate the development of the relationship (“You share enough so it’s not a one-way street”). However, sharing information in a prison context was acknowledged as having an added element of risk in that an innocent disclosure could be quickly circulated and used by some clients as a means of manipulating staff or, in extreme circumstances, of threatening them and/or their families.

Some counsellors also regarded being authentic as involving respect for the significance of the role that they occupied and recognising the power differential that existed between the practitioner and client. This included a willingness to be frank and open when firm handling of a difficult situation was needed.

I had someone yesterday who [had self-harmed], and in the middle of [the counselling session] he said, “You won’t tell them will you?”—meaning the officers . . . I had to explain to him in a way that he would still feel supported, even though I would have to disclose [what he had confided] and [that] a whole series of other events would have to happen as a result of that disclosure.

Another counsellor commented that although his method of forming a working relationship with an imprisoned client was the same as for a community-based client, the key difference was that if the situation escalated out of control, there were various mechanisms in place within a prison (e.g., duress alarms) designed to protect a practitioner's safety.

## **A Non-Judgemental Attitude**

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Counsellors described some of the challenges associated with remaining non-judgemental when working with clients who had committed grave offences and/or who were regarded as “dangerous”. These participants were mostly parents and the examples they provided concerned the sexual or physical abuse of children of a similar age and gender to their own children. As one such counsellor said:

I'm sitting there with him thinking, “You are my worst nightmare, man. You f—ing do that to my son”.

One strategy identified for dealing with these situations was choosing not to read the details of the offence before meeting the client. Those who did choose to access this information spoke of needing to work harder at being non-judgemental given that, in their view, individuals experiencing incarceration were extremely adept at detecting when people were not being genuine. It also required counsellors to draw on their “ego-strengths” and to remain in touch with their own feelings, thoughts, and values, whilst seeing beyond a client's offending behaviour.

Counsellor patience was a further key factor mentioned in this regard. Many clients were described as “carrying huge amounts of shame about what they had done”. For them to arrive at a point where they could admit to a counsellor, without fear of judgement, what they were imprisoned for was often, therefore, a protracted process. In these circumstances, counsellors spoke of needing to appease a client's fears by reassuring them that they would continue to see them.

They've got such huge fears about trust, about intimacy . . . and abandonment stuff. Like, if I tell this person I'm in here for rape, is she going to then say, “That's it, I'm not seeing you [the client] anymore?” And a lot of [clients] have expressed that to me as well; if they do say stuff, they're like, “Will you stop seeing me now? Will you have to terminate our sessions?” And I've had to reassure them and say, “No, that doesn't mean that we'll terminate the sessions”. I explain to them what the criteria is [*sic*].

Patience and ongoing reassurance were also identified as being particularly important when working with individuals who struggled with mental health issues and childhood trauma so that they felt accepted and valued.

## Discussion

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The four key themes identified in this study reflect those generally associated with counselling practice in terms of what helps to facilitate the development of a positive therapeutic alliance, regardless of the context. However, within a prison environment, counsellors work with an extremely diverse clientele, which may be resistant to or mistrustful of any “welfare” intervention, and in some cases openly hostile. In this respect, therefore, these four themes have added significance in that they place additional demands on counsellors in regard to the skills and qualities necessary to engage with their clients in a productive way.

Establishing a relationship based on trust is generally accepted as essential to achieving positive therapeutic outcomes and according to Wampold (2015) is a process that should begin as early as possible. The emphasis placed by participants in this study on the importance of the initial contact as part of this process accords with this idea and is further supported by a number of authors who suggest that it is foundational to the development of a therapeutic alliance (Kroll, 2010; Masters, 1994; Okun, 1997; Sun, 2013).

As noted in the literature, however, building a relationship based on trust within a prison context presents additional challenges. Even the apparently “simple” strategies described by participants such as shaking a client’s hand on first contact or asking how they would like to be addressed have added importance given that custodial staff typically summon individuals who are incarcerated by their surname, and the likelihood of being “welcomed” by custodial staff and shaken by the hand is remote. Moreover, the first contact with a client is not only about counsellors trying to put that individual at ease and treating them in the same manner as they would treat any client in the community, but also about feeling at ease within themselves and suspending any apprehensions they may have when meeting clients identified as a possible threat to staff.

It is perhaps not surprising that listening also emerged as a particularly salient theme given that most research on counselling practice emphasises its importance within the relationship-building process (Thompson, 2015; Trotter, 2015). Active listening is acknowledged as an interpersonal skill that requires sensitivity and the ability to pay careful attention to a client’s verbal and non-verbal cues, and then to respond appropriately and constructively. It also requires time and patience, allowing the client to tell their story at their own pace so that they feel valued and heard. This idea aligns closely with the views of Rogers (1961), who believed that within a client-centred approach the role of the therapist is not to provide answers or “solutions” but rather to create an environment where the client feels listened to and understood and thereby able to discover the answers to their questions for themselves.

The findings have revealed how important this skill is when working with individuals who may have no experience of being genuinely listened to by another person. The institutional environment in which they are living also significantly reduces the likelihood of their being “heard” or understood given that it is dominated by rules and regimes and lack of privacy and personal space. Engaging with a counsellor in a space where they feel safe provides this opportunity and allows them to explore their “inner world” and to gain a sense of meaning in their lives and of who they are as a person.

As with listening, the third theme of authenticity or “congruence” identified in this study is also emphasised in the literature as essential to establishing a helping relationship and to facilitating client change (Smale & Tuson, 1988; Sun, 2013; Trotter, 2015). It is also central to Roger’s client-centred model, which stresses the importance of the practitioner being deeply involved within the working relationship and prepared to draw on their own experiences to promote the development of that relationship. Turney (2010) suggests that acting in a way that is inauthentic in a professional relationship can otherwise be unhelpful, even dangerous.

Practising in a way that is “authentic” in a context such as a prison, however, necessitates finding a balance between two potentially conflicting goals: remaining in a professional role with its associated responsibilities and organisational accountability requirements while at the same time avoiding “suffocating their personal selves” (Harrison & Ruch, 2007, p. 41). According to Ruch et al. (2010), if the latter aspect is neglected, the likelihood of providing authentic responses to a client may be compromised. Comments made by several study participants suggest that they recognised the need to maintain this balance. They were able to relate to clients as themselves rather than hiding behind their “professional” role but were also aware of their professional responsibilities as well as the limits to what they disclosed about their personal situations or experiences.

Although interpretations and application of the fourth theme, a non-judgemental attitude, vary somewhat amongst practitioners, its importance in facilitating the therapeutic relationship and thereby client growth and change is generally recognised (Alexander, 2000). Rogers (1961) described this attitude, which he called “unconditional positive regard”, as the total acceptance of a client regardless of their background, characteristics, words, or behaviours. Writers such as Beckett (2006), however, have questioned the applicability of this notion when working with involuntary clients. In view of the inherent difficulties associated with the concept, which Rogers (1961) himself acknowledged, terms such as “respect” and “positive regard” are sometimes preferred (Alexander, 2000). In practice this means having respect for the feelings and experiences of the client, as well as for their potential, and being able to convey that to them.

It was evident from the findings of this study that many participants found this aspect of their work one of the most vital yet challenging. Being able to relate positively to clients who openly subscribed to an antisocial lifestyle and/or violent behaviour, who had no remorse or sense of accountability for their actions, was often difficult. For others, awareness of the nature of the crimes committed by some clients, or offences that resonated with counsellors’ personal circumstances, had a major impact on the extent to

which they felt they could remain truly non-judgemental. Although a range of strategies for doing so were identified by them, such as refraining from reading the offence details before meeting a client, it was also clear that some workers continued to struggle with this issue.

A number of other comments related to the findings warrant consideration. One is the importance of practitioners being flexible and creative in their approaches to establishing a connection with their clients. This was exemplified in several ways—for example, the strategies adopted to engage women of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent or clients who spoke minimal English and/or who were unfamiliar with the concept of counselling. It also reflects a deep commitment to the principles of relationship-based practice and of working in a way that acknowledges the unique needs and circumstances of each individual.

A further point relates to the complexity of the environment in which counsellors work and the inherent conflict that this creates in regard to their roles and what they are able to achieve with their clients. Prisons have been likened to paramilitary organisations (Elliott & Schrink, 2009; Williams, 1996), and working within this system and culture requires counsellors to straddle two worlds: one concerned with partnership, connection, and relationship, and the other with obeying the rules and requirements of a “command-and-control” culture (Peryer, 2002, p. 299). The many constraints associated with working as a counsellor within an environment of this nature have been widely documented in the literature and cannot be underestimated in terms of their impact on a practitioner’s ability to establish realistic and meaningful relationships with their clients.

Although the influence of broader-level constraints is recognised, as previously stated, the focus of this paper is on the strategies employed by prison counsellors when working within these constraints. It has shown that counsellors do find ways of working within them, and that some are able to do so effectively. The four themes highlighted in this study were identified as particularly valuable in enhancing the likelihood of a practitioner achieving effective and affective relationships with individuals who are incarcerated and thereby assisting them not only to cope with life within a prison but also to facilitate their personal growth and development.

## **Conclusion**

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For participants in this study the relationship was clearly central to their practice approach and regarded as a key factor for enabling long-term positive change. A primary aim was to provide clients with a different experience of a relationship and to help them learn that not all relationships were dangerous or threatening. As one counsellor commented:

It’s really about a relationship with another human being. Now if you can actually establish that in a very meaningful way, they can take that out into the world and hopefully bring it into another relationship.

Finding ways of overcoming the many potential barriers to a client's preparedness to engage with them was therefore of paramount importance to these practitioners. It not only required them to draw on a variety of skills, but also to remain genuine and honest in their interactions with their clients, while adhering to their professional mandate within the Justice Department.

It could be argued that the elements of practice highlighted in this paper as being essential to the establishment of professional worker–client relationships within a prison context apply to any counselling situation. However, working within the highly regimented environment of a prison, with a clientele whose behaviour has been deemed sufficiently serious to warrant incarceration, clearly places additional demands on practitioners in terms of how best to approach their counselling roles. Above all, it necessitates practice approaches that incorporate increased levels of self-awareness, resilience, creativity, and cultural sensitivity in order that meaningful therapeutic alliances can be established.

Although based on a small-scale exploratory descriptive study of counsellors working in Western Australian prisons, the findings presented here provide counsellors' personal insights into the different ways in which they attempt to connect with their clients and thereby establish a sound basis for working productively with them. As such, they have potential relevance and applicability to counsellors working in prisons elsewhere and to those working in other statutory settings. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to ongoing discussion about an area of practice that is not always well understood.

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## Declarations

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Neither author of this paper has any conflicts of interest to declare.

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