

Counselling
psychology in
australia and a self-
assessment of skills,
values, and ...



This essay consisted of two parts. The first part was an introduction of counselling psychology in Australia and the second part was a self-reflection of key skills, values and attributes in relation to the suitability of counselling psychologists as a potential occupation.

Counselling psychology in Australia

In Australia, The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is the largest organization representing professional psychologists and counselling psychology is one of the nine colleges under APS each representing a specialized area of practice. The College of Counselling Psychology has a membership of 1075 as of June 2019 (Australian Psychological Society, 2019). To become a member of the College of Counselling Psychology, one must have completed a Masters or Doctorate program in counselling psychology, or a combined Masters/PhD program accredited by Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC) followed by a minimum of one to two years full-time supervised practice (APS, 2019).

Counselling psychologists (CPs) in Australia have been traditionally employed in government departments, educational settings, and community service centres (Mullings, Denham, & Grant, 2008). However, there has been a trend of Australian CPs moving into private practice in the past two decades (Di Mattia & Grant, 2016; Mullings et al., 2008). A recent survey found that almost 50% of CPs in Australia are practicing privately and clinical practitioner/therapist was identified as the primary work role by most CPs (Goodyear et al., 2016).

Counselling psychology in Australia has adopted the scientist-practitioner model where evidence-based practice is the most important underpinning feature for the profession (Brown & Corne, 2005; Mullings et al., 2008). CPs use psychotherapeutic methods that are empirically supported and validated to assess and treat a wide range of psychological problems and mental disorders. CPs in Australia draw upon diverse streams of psychotherapy theories including integrative or eclectic therapies, cognitive-behavioural therapies, and psychodynamic therapies to address psychological issues (Brown & Corne, 2005). Although CPs have been assumed to work with “less severe” psychological problems, CPs reported to frequently work with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders and sexual abuse (Mullings et al., 2008). In fact, CPs are trained to conduct evidence-based assessment and interventions of mental disorders ranging from normal to severe and are expected to demonstrate advanced understanding of major psychiatric taxonomies, such as DSM and ICD as a key competency requirement according to APS (2012).

In addition, CPs in Australia aims to recognize the strength, resources and well-being of the clients and work towards a meaningful therapeutic alliance to bring about positive outcomes (APS, 2012) . Regardless the severity of the mental disturbance the client is experiencing, CPs work alongside with the client with an emphasis on acknowledging the client’s strength and resilience in the circumstance as well as addressing psychopathology (Brown & Corne, 2005). CPs thus place particular focus on building a meaningful therapeutic relationship based on empirical evidence supporting the

effectiveness of therapeutic alliance for positive outcomes (APS, 2012; Brown & Corne, 2005).

Furthermore, the ability to work with multiple client modalities including couple, family and group therapies is another important skill possessed by CPs (Davis-McCabe & Di Mattia, 2018; Schofield, 2013). While individual counselling was still the most popular service provided by CPs in Australia, a significant number of CPs (70.6%) reported engaging in couple and family counselling (Pelling, 2007). The APAC accredited training programs of counselling psychology also include at least one additional modality as a major component of the program (APAC, 2019).

Lastly, CPs are expected to carry out culturally specific and culturally sensitive practice to address the unique needs of multicultural groups in Australia's social context (APS, 2012). Such groups include Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders, Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. According to a report published by APAC to review the skill requirement for CPs, to apply culturally responsive assessment and interventions are recognized as key competencies (APAC, 2019). However, the current picture of Australian CPs is far less diverse than it should be. Two survey studies revealed similar demographic characteristics of Australian CPs where the majority was mature females (68.6% and 71%, mean age 55.1 and 48.6 years respectively), most of which are Caucasian with Christian beliefs, heterosexual and have one or more children (Goodyear et al., 2016; Pelling, 2007). Further to the generic lack of diversity, most CPs tend to receive limited training and little professional skills development in multicultural

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competencies (Pelling, 2007). Consequently, this leaves the counselling services available to the NESB, indigenous people and the LGBT community largely questionable. While it is the unique stance of counselling psychology to recognize the strength and resources of individuals to bring about positive outcomes, it is critical for CPs to understand cross-cultural values and contexts and to develop culturally sensitive counselling skills to achieve this goal.

In short, CPs in Australia are characterized by evidence-based psychopathology, therapeutic alliance, multiple modalities, and cross-cultural competency.

Self-reflection of skills, values and attributes

Skills Self-assessment

Before I decided to go back to university to pick my undergraduate study in psychology, I have been working as an account manager for a large clothing supplier for three years. 90% of my job was done via phone calls and emails to communicate with customers and between different departments. I was able to understand customers' inquiries very quickly over the phone and to give them clear instructions and explanations to answer their questions or to settle the disputes. When there was a miscommunication between the sales department and the warehouse causing errors in order processing, I was acting as a bridge between different departments to enable effective communication and to resolve the issues. When there was a major dispute with important customers, I was able to compose formal business emails to address the conflict and to negotiate between different parties. Several of <https://assignbuster.com/counselling-psychology-in-australia-and-a-self-assessment-of-skills-values-and-attributes/>

my emails were used as examples by the management later on in similar situations. Such strong oral and written communication skills are highly transferable to the work of a CP since essentially CPs work in a collaborative manner with a range of stakeholders including clients, medical services, and community and social services where effective communication is invaluable for overall outcomes.

Another major strength I found in myself was the bilingual skills and cross-cultural competencies that are highly relevant to counselling psychology. I am a native Mandarin speaker and I have been living in Australia for 12 years since the age of 17. Therefore, I consider myself having a mix of Chinese and Australian cultural backgrounds. Being fluent in both English and Mandarin gives me the advantage to communicate with non-English speaking clients, particularly Chinese immigrants. According to Victoria's diverse population census in 2016, 28.4% of Victoria's population was born overseas and 26% speak languages other than English at home (The State of Victoria Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2017). Mandarin ranked No. 1 with approximately 200,000 speakers among Victorian residents (The State of Victoria Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2017). Unfortunately, I only found one bilingual mandarin speaking CP in the entire Melbourne metropolitan region on the *APS Find a Psychologist* website. This revealed a depressing picture of cultural inequality of mental health services in Australia as a multicultural society. Research suggests that counselling services in a second language could be potentially less effective due to the limited language fluency of the clients and could create emotional distancing effects to further reduce the effectiveness of therapy (Pelling, 2007). Thus, I am

motivated to become a bilingual CP with great cross-cultural competencies to provide bilingual and culturally specific services for Chinese Australians.

In the end, the skills that I would like to further develop are team working skills. My past work experience did not provide me with many opportunities to work in a team hence I tend to shy away from team work because first I feel most comfortable working alone and second due to the lack of experience. Although private practice is the most popular employment choice for CPs, I believe team work skills are still highly important for CPs as it is a collaborative work for best outcomes.

Values Self-assessment

The three important values I personally identify the most with are namely challenge, personal balance, and helping others.

Challenge is the most important thing for me in a professional career. I love solving complex issues and to be challenged constantly in a job. Going back to school to do the GDPA course is a challenge itself and it motivates and excites me every single day. For a CP, the complexity of individuals' psychology and the diverse profiles of clients makes this a challenging role and you can always learn something new along the way.

The second value I appreciate is personal balance. I have worked the nine-to-five schedule in the past I found it not suitable for my lifestyle. Over 50% CPs are engaged in private practice which is an ideal employment option for me in terms of the autonomy it allows and the flexibility to fit my needs for family duties. Nevertheless, working alone could create isolation and lead to

burnout eventually. Such potential risks and disadvantages of private practice as a CP should be also considered carefully to take proactive adjustments to it.

The last one is helping others. As I talked about the lack of cross-cultural counselling services in Australia, I am really motivated to provide mental health services for minority groups because I believe in the equal rights to health and well-being of all social classes. If I could use my professional skills to help the minority groups to improve psychological well-being, that would make the most rewarding and satisfying experience for me.

Attributes Self-assessment

The five attributes I find best describe myself are independent, insightful, clear-thinking, compassionate, and open-minded.

Since I left my family to study in Australia from a young age, I had no choice but to figure out everything on my own. Living in a foreign country alone, facing all the difficult issues from late adolescence to young adulthood, I learnt to be insightful to the circumstances and to think logically to make rational decisions with limited resources available. Becoming independent, insightful and clear-thinking with critical engagement with information presented, I can greatly relate to CP as a scientist-practitioner working independently.

Living in a foreign country from a young age and being fluent in two languages also made me compassionate and open-minded. Bilingual ability gives me the openness and ability to communicate with people from diverse

backgrounds. The cross-cultural life experience allows me to be non-judgemental towards cultural differences and to appreciate people's uniqueness. Hence, this facilitates me to identify clients' unique strength and assets and to build a therapeutic alliance for positive changes.

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