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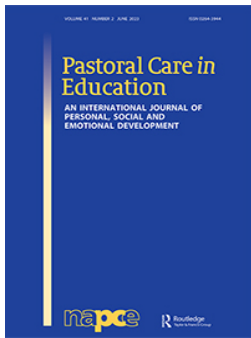
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## “Renegades, outsiders and lone warriors”: A qualitative study exploring perceptions of professional identity among counsellors working with children and young people in the United Kingdom

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# “Renegades, outsiders and lone warriors”: A qualitative study exploring perceptions of professional identity among counsellors working with children and young people in the United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

The present study investigates how counsellors working with children and young people (CYP) perceive their professional identity, and how the ‘Practitioner Manual’ and BACP Competence Frameworks, commissioned by the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP; 2014/2019a), can contribute to the strengthening of CYP counsellor professional identity. Participants were qualified counsellors working with CYP clients in England and Scotland. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse data. Findings were organised under three master themes: individual perception of professional identity; others’ perceptions of professional identity; role of resources on formation and development of professional identity. Sub-themes included: discomfort with the concept of professionalism; misunderstandings and misconceptions; a desire for a recognised professional identity. Findings indicate that the provision of counselling for CYP clients could be enhanced by establishing a recognised professional identity underpinned by required minimum training standards and leading to registration with a recognised professional body.

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## KEYWORDS

Professional identity; counselling; children and young people; competence framework; IPA

## Introduction

The last two decades have seen increased interest in the emotional and psychological welfare of children in the UK and in counselling as an intervention found to improve wellbeing among children and young people (CYP) (Cooper et al., 2021). During this time CYP counselling has been provided by counsellors from a range of backgrounds, including those trained to work with adult clients and potentially lacking training in specialist knowledge and skills required for counselling CYP. Specialist skills and knowledge include a broad understanding of child development, capacity to use creative and play therapy skills, as well as

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an understanding of relevant legal and safeguarding issues (Kegerreis, 2006), and capacity for inter-agency working. This issue was expressed recently by the Association of Child Psychotherapists (ACP) in a Briefing for the House of Lords (Association for Child Psychotherapists ACP, 2020) regarding unqualified and unregulated practitioners working with CYP. Concerns centred around potential risk to vulnerable CYP clients, a lack of clarity regarding levels of qualifications and skills in the CYP therapy workforce, and a 'particular concern' regarding employment of practitioners trained to work with adults working with CYP clients (2020, p. 2).

### ***Understanding professional identity and professionalism in counselling for CYP***

The continued provision of effective counselling for CYP requires a coherent professional identity based on a specialised knowledge-base with a clear practical application and value to society (Hanna & Bemak, 1997). Professional identity can be usefully understood as a self-conceptualised frame of reference, developed via training, professional development, and experience in practice, intentionally used as a basis for conducting a professional role (Brott & Myers, 1999). Brott and Myers (1999) found a 'dynamic interplay' of phases of development in professional identity development among school counsellors, influenced by factors, such as counsellor training, contact with other counsellors, and the developmental issues of students in their context, along with directives issued by the principal (1999, p.343). This definition of professional identity is taken as the basis for the term within this study, as it offers an important ecological understanding of professional development, highly relevant for counsellors working with CYP clients who frequently need to adapt their practice depending on organisational context.

Concerns have been expressed by person-centred practitioners that professionalism may interfere with the provision of therapeutic relationship conditions (empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard), established by Carl Rogers as 'necessary and sufficient' for therapeutic progress (House, 2010; Rogers, 1951, 1973). Rogers (1973) takes the view that an assumption of expertise in the counsellor is counter to a therapeutic process based on these conditions, asking 'Dare we do away with professionalism' (Rogers, 1973).

### ***Counselling CYP: the need for a professional identity***

The practice of counselling UK in schools began during the 1960s (Bor, 2002), developing out of a growing emphasis on pastoral care and view of education as needing to support identity development and emotional wellbeing, particularly during adolescence (Hamblin, 1974). While in the UK counselling in schools has been largely confined to a therapeutic

intervention, internationally the role differs widely due to cultural differences in how the role is perceived within organisational and educational systems (Low, 2009). Counselling as a response to psychological and emotional difficulties during childhood is now widely accepted (Cooper et al., 2021; Hanley & Noble, 2017), and is a statutory provision within state schools in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Significantly, counsellors differ from other professionals employed in education who are required to operate in line with statutory guidance and government directives in areas, such as teaching and safeguarding (Jenkins & Polat, 2006).

Hasenfeld (1992) makes the case that all forms of human service must be perceived as legitimate by clients, regulators, and resource-providers. In counselling this includes the clients themselves, as well as parents and carers, social services, headteachers and other stakeholders. Policy makers and commissioners such as government agencies require clarity regarding counselling for CYP, including understanding of the skills and competences of those delivering it, as well as the evidence-base for its efficacy as an intervention. In this way, a coherent and publicly recognised professional identity ensures the provision of a high standard of counselling to those who would benefit most from this intervention. The (2014)/2019a) Competence Frameworks and Practitioner Manual (Kirkbride, 2018), aim to strengthen the professional identity of CYP counselling. These documents make explicit the competences required for effective and ethical therapeutic work with CYP. Their detailed knowledge and skills in specialist areas, such as child development, therapeutic models for counselling CYP, which are sensitive to developmental needs, ethical and legal issues, cultural competence, and working in organisational contexts ((2014)/2019a).

Previous studies have examined professional identity among counsellors working with CYP (Gignac & Gazzola, 2016; Harris, 2009), as well as the significance of professional identity for the provision of effective counselling (Brott & Myers, 1999). However, these have not directly explored the influence of professional standards on CYP counsellor professional identity in the UK, although there is literature available from the US where school counselling has been longer established as a discrete profession (Brott & Myers, 1999; Gibson et al., 2012; Hayes & Paisley, 2002).

The present study aimed to bridge these gaps by investigating UK practitioners' perceptions of professional identity as well as the influence of the Practitioner Manual (Kirkbride, 2018) and BACP Competence Frameworks ((2014)/2019a) on professional identity in the field. This comes with a view to developing an understanding of the role of professional identity in providing effective and ethical therapeutic services to CYP, as well as contributing to the expansion of effective counselling provision within specific contexts such as education.

## Research aims and methodology

A qualitative research protocol using semi-structured interviews was developed to investigate participants' perceptions of professional identity, their understanding of how this is perceived by others, and whether this had been influenced by the introduction of (2014)/2019a) Competence Frameworks and Practitioner Manual (Kirkbride, 2018). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) was selected for data analysis. Based on a phenomenological epistemology (Osborne, 1994) IPA offers scope for exploration and interpretation of the meaning participants make of a particular experience or aspect of their life. IPA is consistent with the social constructionist view that sociocultural and historical processes are central to how people experience and understand their lives, including the stories they tell about themselves (Willig, 2008). This is apt when considering the impact of the introduction of professional standards within a field that has been largely self-governing for decades.

### *Participants and recruitment procedure*

Prior to beginning the study, ethical approval was granted by a UK university.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants able to provide relevant data. To be included in the study participants needed to (a) be aged 18 years or over, (b) be fluent in English, (c) be qualified counsellors registered with an appropriate professional body, (d) have access to a computer and enough privacy in order to take part in an online interview, (e) have worked as CYP counsellors (4–18 years) for a minimum of three years, (f) have engaged with the Practitioner Manual (Kirkbride, 2018) and BACP (2014/2019b) Competence Framework, either during training or as part of their continuing professional development activities. An 'ePoster' was produced detailing study aims and procedures, and inclusion criteria. This was shared via the principal investigator's professional networks (via LinkedIn). A call for participants was also posted on the BACP 'Research Noticeboard' and interested individuals contacted the principal investigator by email. Following initial contact, eligible participants were given consent forms and participant information sheets (PIS) to ensure they were thoroughly informed regarding the study. An appointment was made at a mutually convenient time for interviews to be conducted and audio-recorded on Microsoft Teams. Prior to interviews taking place, audio-consent was recorded, participants were advised of their pseudonym and reminded of the process of withdrawing from the study, should they wish. Seven participants were recruited, two identifying as male and five as female. All were practicing in settings in the UK, seeing clients in educational contexts. Two participants practised in settings in Scotland where state schools are the responsibility of

Education Scotland, and five in England in settings under the governmental auspices of the Department for Education. Some additionally worked privately and/or in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Participants identified as either person-centred or integrative in practise modality.

### **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour were recorded with each participant between October and November 2021. Interviews followed a semi-structured format based on a 'topic guide' of areas for investigation. Post-interview, recordings were anonymised and uploaded to a secure OneDrive storage system. All data presented in this paper have been anonymised.

### **Data analysis**

Audio recordings of each interview were transcribed verbatim before being analysed in line with IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2009). The first stage of analysis involved close listening to recordings while noting initial responses to content. This stage was useful in allowing the researcher to 'bracket off' initial responses (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82), prior to subsequent stages. A reflexive approach was taken (Bager-Charleson, 2014), recognising identifications with participants and their experience, while acknowledging responses, which could interfere with neutrality in subsequent stages of the analysis. For example, having been a school-based counsellor for many years I could identify with participants' experiences in this field, while also appreciating the potential influence of their training modality on their responses, as well as my own psychodynamic orientation in conducting the analysis.

At stage two, transcripts were coded, in line with Smith et al. (2009), using three columns for noting observations of descriptive elements, linguistic data, and conceptual comments. Descriptive comments enabled an understanding of narratives regarding perception of professional identity, while noting choice and use of language enabled the researcher to go beneath the descriptive to gain a richer understanding of the meaning. Column three was where interpretation of the data using a double-hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009) allowing meaning-making and identification of themes. Stages were repeated for each transcript, prior to cross-analysis exploring themes, which developed across transcripts.

### **Results**

Following the analysis, three master themes were developed, along with seven sub-themes (see Table 1), representing thematic connections across transcripts.

**Table 1.** Master/sub-themes.

Master Themes	Sub-Themes
<i>Master theme 1: '... sort of a bit dirty': Participant perceptions of professional identity</i>	1.1. Relational skills and professional identity 1.2. 'Dirty' word - discomfort with concept of professional identity 1.3. CYP counsellor as 'outsider'
<i>Master theme 2: '... they think counsellors are a bit flaky': How others perceive CYP counsellor professional identity</i>	2.1. Misunderstandings and misconceptions 2.2. Managing professional boundaries
<i>Master theme 3: '... the profession's in a different space now': Role of professional resources in formation and development of professional identity</i>	3.1. Provision of clarity and structure regarding CYP counsellor identity 3.2. Need for resources to support development of professional identity

The three master themes were represented across all seven transcripts, although as demonstrated in the findings, there were differences in emphasis across the sub-themes.

### **Master theme 1: '... sort of a bit dirty': participant perceptions of professional identity**

#### **Relational skills and professional identity**

All participants expressed the view that the capacity to provide the relational core conditions (empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard) (Rogers, 1951) was fundamental to their professional identity. In addition, specific skills necessary for counselling CYP in terms of 'creating safe spaces', and power-dynamics were identified:

**Juliet:** *Uh, I think first of all working with children, young people, it's the connection. It's the capacity to make the connection with the young person whereby they ... feel safe. (P1:158–9).*

Relational skills of congruence and empathy (Rogers, 1951) were seen as important in creating trust and empowering clients:

**Mark:** *I'm OK as me in the room ... which I believe then allows the other, especially adolescents, to go, 'If it's OK for him to be him in the room, maybe it's OK for me to be to be me in the room'. (P3:291–92),*

**Amanda:** *you need to be, kind of in their worlds ... but not as a fake. And you have to be real. If you're not you, they will ... they will not have any time for you at all. (P5: 191-2).*

#### **'Dirty' word – discomfort with concept of professional identity**

While participants were comfortable describing relational counselling skills as fundamental to professional identity, there was tension around identifying as professionals. Professionalism prompted associations with status and power



perceived as in conflict with a person-centred approach, particularly in terms of congruence:

**Tracey:** ... So I've never been that keen on kind of the status or the professional value of something ... I feel like I'm doing something that's meaningful to me and that's important to me ... (P4:168–69).

The term 'status' offers a particular linguistic interpretation of the concept of professionalism, linking it to expertise, authority and power, and reducing 'meaningfulness' in the process:

**Tracey:** Well, I suppose when you asked that question, I felt quite difficult to answer ... what my professional identity is ... I suppose that maybe goes a bit back to that kind of exceptionalism ... you know we're different ... we do this just because that kind of idea that that we're, you know ... maybe it's sort of a bit dirty to have a professional identity, alright? (P4: 190–2).

The word 'dirty' is striking in this context. 'dirty' is defined as 'unclean', 'dishonest', or 'deserving of disgust' (Merriam-Webster.Com, n.d., retrieved in March 2021). This highlights the predicament expressed by participants who see professionalism as implying expertise, authority, and power and therefore as antithetical to the core principles of client-centred (Rogers, 1951) epistemology.

### **CYP counsellor as 'outsider'**

A further area of tension for participants was in their positionality within the organisational systems they were employed in. Participants expressed strong views regarding these systems, particularly education:

**Amanda:** We're kind of like Renegades ... We challenge, we don't want them to be meek, wee pupils, we want them to think and we want them to be able to question, because we're asking them to question how their life is ... we want them to be the individuals that society doesn't want them to be, I suppose ... definitely not education (P5:325–6),

**Sandra:** And I'm really clear that as a counsellor, I'm not there to ... I want to say deliver what the school expects me to deliver ... it's not part of my job to make students fit into school ... In fact, I would say to encourage the school to fit the students is more part of my job (P6:207-8),

**Grace:** One of the things I say ... initially when I'm introducing counselling to students is, 'there's no gun to your head for you to be here. You may have been sent here by teacher, parent ... there's no gun to your head, but there is a gun to your head to go to school (P2:269-72).

A 'renegade' lives 'outside' of society, and 'rejects lawful, or conventional behaviour' (Merriam-Webster.com, retrieved March 2022) and it was evident that participants saw themselves as pivotal in reducing the inherent disempowerment of CYP within society, some viewing 'professionalism' as a potential hindrance in this respect. The use of 'gun to your head' here indicates the strength of the view that the frame for counselling needs to be perceived as different from that of education with its inherent denial of individual autonomy:

**Mark:** *So I have the title of counsellor, oh ... I'm powerful ... I'm a grown up ... there's all these power dynamics at play that I think can be really unhelpful themselves ... and therefore to subvert those power dynamics ... like teachers have a lot of power, mum and dad have a lot of power, adolescents can feel very powerless ... So I always say like my doors aren't locked, ... like you can walk out at any point ... you have that choice (P3:424–9).*

Participants shared a desire to provide services founded in ethical principles of autonomy and beneficence (British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy BACP, 2018) within an educational system based on a legal requirement to attend. Participants perceived value in being 'outside' of this system to some extent. This 'outsider' identity holds therapeutic value in encouraging clients to share experiences that others may not be willing to hear and in enhancing the therapeutic relationship, as outlined previously.

While perceived as useful in supporting client-centred practice, the 'outsider' position also led to an experience of being left 'out of the loop' in multi-agency discussions:

**Amanda:** *... and I've now got good working relationships with one person in CAMHS, but I'm very much seen as the outsider ... I don't get any, erm updates from schools and things like that. I'm out ... I'm out the loop (P5:23).*

There is an indication that to be 'in the loop' would involve giving up some of the valuable 'renegade' or 'outsider' qualities, perceived as integral to supporting CYP autonomy and agency.

### **Master theme 2: '... they think counsellors are a bit flaky': perceptions of how others perceive CYP counsellor professional identity**

A key aim of the study was to understand how CYP counsellors experience the perceptions of allied professionals. A distinctive aspect of counselling CYP is the frequent requirement to practice within an organisational system that includes 'interested' third-parties, such as teachers, social-workers, parents etc. For counselling to be effective and in the best interests of the client, there is a need for understanding of multiple professional and other roles as well as their limitations and boundaries (Brott & Myers, 1999; Gignac & Gazzola, 2016).

#### **Misunderstandings and misconceptions**

Participants perceived their role as frequently misunderstood and/or viewed negatively by others:

**Sandra:** *I think the role of a counsellor is quite misunderstood, maybe particularly in school when people make referral ... it was often around, "I want you to give them strategies for ...", which some counsellors might do, and it might be legitimate, but it's not a part of the way I view my work ... (P6:414–20),*

**Amanda:** ... conversation ... in a car park with a crowd of teachers was, 'Oh my God. I don't know how you do your job. I couldn't be bothered listening to all their petty, "I'm not talking to them", 'my boyfriend says this, so I hate him" ...', and I thought, 'do you really think that is what our kids come in with?' (5:15/16).

Amanda's words 'do you really think?', suggest confusion at the perceived dismissive attitude regarding her work. Other participants echoed similar concerns regarding the way they are viewed as professionals:

**Tracey:** I do think, especially when we talk about educational psychology, I get the feeling they think counsellors are a bit flaky and a bit ... that there's ... maybe some questions about professionalism' (P4:259–60).

'Flaky', used here in an idiomatic and informal sense, is defined as, 'markedly odd or unconventional' and additionally carries connotations of unreliability. By contrast, participants frequently experienced projections of omnipotence from others:

**Grace:** ... so you will get the idea that "she knows everything" ... an idea that, "... send them to Grace 'cause Grace'll sort them out" ... So, you've got this idea that I've got all the answers and I'm God and I'm just gonna blow a miracle on these young people and then they're going to go back into the classroom (P2:203–6).

### **Managing professional boundaries**

In contrast to the 'outsider' position discussed in 1.1 above, findings also demonstrated participants seeking ways of working that allow boundaries to be held while integrating services within the wider school system:

**Robert:** ... so, I do a 3-way contract between myself, the clients and the safeguarding officer, because that way I feel held and also it gives me freedom to talk ... and ... the safeguarding officer can say, "Oh, how did XX get on". I don't feel I'm breaching confidentiality because I've clearly set that contract in our session one really (P7: 82–88),

**Mark,** ... I think when counselling is really integrated into the school system, that is good for everyone ... like I think that's good for all the children sitting in class, not just the, the children who are seen by the therapist. Not just for the teacher's well-being, but for everyone ... (P4: 334-6).

This can be contrasted with Sandra, who experienced misunderstanding of counselling and boundaries around confidentiality having a negative impact on effective team-work within a school setting:

**Sandra:** There were discussions at one point about everybody in the pastoral team should know the names of all the people I'm working with, and I was very resistant to that because I explain to my clients who needs to know they're coming and it's two or three people and I don't want to say it's 10 or 12 people need to know you're coming ... and I don't know to what extent they really understand that, yeah, there's some joking about it and I don't know, 'Secret Sandra', or something like that. (P6:240–44).

### **Master theme 3: '... the profession's in a different space now': role of professional resources in formation and development of professional identity**

The aim of the study was to investigate what influence the Competence Framework (BACP, 2014 /2019b) and Practitioner Manual (Kirkbride, 2018) have had in strengthening professional identity for CYP counsellors. The findings indicated the potential value of these resources for counsellors new to the field, as well as in supporting recruitment of appropriately trained counsellors to work with CYP by schools and other organisations:

#### **Provision of clarity and structure regarding CYP counsellor identity**

Having been in practice for over two decades, Robert was in a strong position to comment on changes within the profession influencing professional identity.

**Robert:** *Yeah, I think they're very lucky ... the structure of the training curriculum now is so clear it makes my job easier ... in terms of ... here's the curriculum, this is why I'm doing it ... I'm following what my professional body's recommending ... there's a clarity there that probably in the past there wouldn't have been ... So in that sense there's something quite reassuring or sort of clearer, for potential students in terms of what they're what they're going to receive ... and I think it strengthens the identity (P7:393-4),*

**Robert:** *How does school make that decision in terms of, what does the school know about what qualifications actually we should have as a decently qualified and experienced therapist or an agency for a voluntary sector agency? (P7:428-33).*

Tracey, the most recently qualified of the participants, spoke about the role of the BACP Competence Framework in guiding her professional development in terms of understanding required competences:

**Tracey:** *... when I was originally looking at working with children and young people, I looked at the BACP framework and that's what really led me onto the training and feeling that I was fulfilling that, so it was important that I sort of I got the training to make sure that I met those criteria (P4:243-45).*

Robert reflected on the difference such resources would have made earlier in his professional development:

**Robert:** *I think it's interesting, 'cause in the beginning of my career it was much more of working ... very classically, person-centred relationally, and using some creativity with very little framework whatsoever ... but now there's a completely different framework, so it feels that the profession's in a different space now ... compared to those beginnings ... there's much more structure ... there's far more resources (P7:272-77).*

#### **Need for resources to support development of professional identity**

Findings showed that the (2014)/2019a) Competence Frameworks and Practitioner Manual (Kirkbride, 2018) were perceived as supporting counsellors in their professional standing with other agencies. However, within this theme, a question emerges around the availability of resources to support appropriate

professional development as well as the delivery of appropriately commissioned and supported counselling services. Several participants expressed experiencing isolation as professionals and of being unable to easily access needed resources:

**Robert:** ... one concern I think about identity is I often feel a 'lone warrior' ... there aren't many practitioners around with a CYP specialism, and so to gain support for me sometimes is tricky, and it means traveling to study all around the country ... (P7:24-7),

**Tracey:** I'm quite isolated. I don't ... other than the other team, I don't really know other counsellors who work with children and young people ... So, I have an independent supervisor who I've just changed recently ... 'cause I felt like I needed more support with that identity and with what that means (P4: 226-32).

This need for resources and experience in isolation seems to strengthen the need for shared identities and communities of practice among CYP counsellors.

## Discussion

All participants emphasised the importance of the relational therapy skills required for counselling CYP. Holding a counsellor's identity in an educational context was a complex and challenging task for them, and a need was expressed for this to be supported by defined professional standards, understood by both practitioners and those involved in commissioning and developing services for CYP. There was an overall sense of the value of the BACP (2019a/2019b) Competence Framework and the Practitioner Manual (Kirkbride, 2018) in supporting the development of professional identity and in providing clear competences required for effective and ethical practice.

A significant theme of the study was that of the challenge of integrating professional standards within a community of practitioners for whom professionalism can be perceived as at odds with therapeutic orientation (Rogers, 1973). This is in-line with the person-centred view that the capacity to provide the core conditions can be acquired through experiential processes, and that formal qualifications can be unnecessary and have little use in a relationship founded on the principle of being 'just a human being in a room with another human' (House & Lowenthal, 2009; Proctor, 2017; Rogers, 1973). While this approach offers potential for non-oppressive relationships that may help facilitate autonomy, there is a place for a critical understanding of power in counselling CYP (Proctor, 2017). For example, it can be argued that taking an approach to professional work, which minimises authoritative directiveness is an effective way of having power over clients since the approach is selected and driven by the therapist themselves, arguably in the interest of the client (Pilgrim & Treacher, 1992). This highlights the specific issues regarding power-dynamics in therapeutic work with CYP, where power is perceived and experienced differently from work where both therapist and client are adults with close to

equal status. Adolescent clients interviewed post-therapy were found to regard counsellors as powerful and expert figures, experiencing this in a positive way as demonstrating the counsellor's emotional stability and capacity for the work (Cook & Monk, 2020). As Kegerreis (2020) notes, CYP clients are more likely to experience therapeutic relationships as occurring between a child and an adult and that is therefore what is important for counsellors to attune themselves to the nuances and meanings of power-dynamics in each therapeutic relationship, as well as across the therapeutic process as a continuum.

Another notable finding was the perception among participants of counselling as counter-culture to the prevailing education system. Counsellors are positioned both 'within' and 'outside' of the school system (Harris, 2009), without a clear understanding of the implications of this for practice. Brott and Myers (1999) view development of counsellor professional identity as a 'dynamic inter-play' of phases of development, influenced by environmental factors, such as counsellor training, contact with other counsellors, developmental issues of students, and executive directive issued by leaders. Given that state schools in both England and Scotland are overseen by government departments (Department for Education and Education Scotland respectively), counsellor identities will arguably develop in response to such factors, without the counsellor necessarily being aware that this is the case. A perceived function of counselling CYP seemed to be to counter or undo perceived impingements on CYP autonomy, as in the imposition of 'conditions of worth' on infant development (Rogers, 1951). The counsellor facilitates this 'undoing' by providing relationships in which autonomy, acceptance and congruence are paramount. This appears significant within an educational context based on a legal requirement to attend rather than autonomous choice. While there is increased interest in school counselling and children's social and emotional wellbeing (Cooper et al., 2021; Harris, 2009), this remains subsidiary to the primary function of education in meeting nationally established attainment targets. It is on these measures that schools are scored and placed on public league tables, rather than on emotional, psychological, or social wellbeing of students. Whilst education in the UK continues to be target and attainment driven, arguably in-line with a neo-liberal educational agenda (Savage, 2017), client-centred school counsellors are in danger of positioning themselves in an 'outside' position rather than becoming integrated within the education system. In order for all parties to move towards each other, rather than becoming more deeply entrenched in polarised positions, counsellors will benefit from training that facilitates understanding of organisational dynamics and their role within these, along with understanding, respect and empathy for the professionals they work alongside (Harris, 2009; Hayes & Paisley, 2002; Kegerreis, 2020; Mcleod & Machin, 1998). Hamblin (1974) foresaw these issues, placing emphasis on the need for careful consideration of the goals of school counselling and their relation to the goals of the school, suggesting that, 'If the goals of counselling are presented in

such a way that they put the counsellor on the side of the pupil against the school, then the integration of counselling into the daily life of the school is unlikely' (1974, p.4). Hamblin argued for the integration of counselling within existing pastoral services in a manner respectful of difference, enabling all parties to see how they could work together to support the best interest of the child. Hamblin's (1974) suggestion is that this undertaken in a spirit of humility, non-judgement and tolerance; values in line with person-centred counselling and therefore offering a foundation for supporting the integration of counselling as part of the pastoral system, rather than operating in counter-culture isolation.

A predominant experience among participants was of being misunderstood, and/or viewed negatively by non-counsellor colleagues. Participants reflected on experiences where colleagues perceived them as 'flaky' (P4: 259–60) and of questionable professionalism. In this regard it seems the 'mystification' (Spinelli, 1994) of the practice of counselling and the reticence to claim a coherent professional identity leaves professionals working alongside counsellors with a lack of understanding of what counsellors actually *do*. Such gaps in professional understanding leave space for denigration of counselling and its methods. Counsellors working in educational rather than clinical settings need to understand how the goals of counselling align with and are understood within the primary institutional task of educating pupils (Hamblin, 1974; Harris, 2009; Kegerreis, 2020). The implication here is that there is an urgent need for improved professional understanding between CYP counsellors and allied professionals within organisational contexts.

The aim of the study was to investigate the influence of (2014)/2019a) Competence Frameworks and Practitioner Manual (Kirkbride, 2018) on CYP counsellor professional identity. Within the findings, the Competence Framework is seen as providing vital resources for strengthening professional identity and counsellor training. This view is supported by Kegerreis (2020) who commends the (2019a) Competence Framework for its role in developing 'excellent' guidelines on competencies to demonstrate the specific skills required and to assist trainings in developing good programmes (2020, p.178). Findings identified that resources supportive of professional development as well as of a sense of community with other professionals was of crucial importance. The introduction of professional training standards allows for organised training and monitoring of the profession (Holmes & Lindley, 1998; Jenkins, 2017). Arguably, this also supports the establishment of 'communities of practice' (Jenkins, 2017), offering resources, support networks and research communities looking at best practice in a changing and challenging environment and bringing CYP counsellors into more regular focused contact.

## Strengths and limitations

This is a small-scale study with seven participants. IPA encourages the use of small samples to obtain rich idiographic data. Interviews provided rich data in part due to the considerable experience of the majority of participants. Additionally, the principal investigators are themselves CYP counsellors able to empathise with the experiences of participants. However, the conflicts regarding professionalism I encountered while conducting the study were new to me and provided a fascinating and important insight into different views on this matter. This seemed a vital ‘piece of the puzzle’ that could have been missed had I only interviewed participants from my own psychodynamic theoretical modality.

In order to develop further understanding it would be beneficial to repeat the study with different and larger groups of counsellors for example, to compare data with newly qualified counsellors who may have been exposed to these resources earlier in their training, or with those from specific therapeutic modalities. Additionally, the position of the principal investigator as author of one of the resources under investigation (Kirkbride, 2018), could be viewed as potentially causing bias among participants in their responses. Participants were aware of this prior to taking part in the study in order for there to be transparency in this regard. A mix of both positive and negative responses were expressed regarding these resources, as shown in the findings. A reflexive journal was kept by the principal investigator during all stages of the research. This aided in ensuring subjective responses to the data and analysis were recognised, noted and ‘bracketed off’ to support objectivity during analysis of the data.

## Conclusion

A need for a coherent professional identity for counsellors working with CYP is indicated, alongside concerns regarding how to move towards this identity in a manner respectful of the central tenets of non-directive client-centred therapy (Rogers, 1951). Training and professional standard frameworks must recognise the specific practice contexts for CYP counselling and the requirements for effective integration of counselling in a variety of organisational contexts. Training in the specific application of counselling to CYP populations is strongly indicated by the findings. CYP counsellor training requires an emphasis on navigating the challenges inherent in multi-agency working, along with in-depth understanding of organisational dynamics. Such training empowers counsellors to become active participants in the school system without compromising professional boundaries, and to contribute to the healthy functioning of the school as a whole.



Participants expressed frustration regarding the lack of suitable resources to support the development of competence and efficacy in practice. Further investigation is needed by professional bodies, such as BACP with a view to identifying and targeting gaps in provision to meet the needs of both practitioners and client groups.

In conclusion, professional counselling bodies, such as BACP, have done much in recent years to support the development of professional standards in the field of CYP counselling ((2014)/2019a; Kirkbride, 2018). This now requires a further step in establishing a specific registration category and title for CYP counsellors, offering a coherent professional identity linked to training based on the (2014)/2019b) competence frameworks and Practitioner Manual (Kirkbride, 2018) and providing clear standards to practitioners and stakeholders alike.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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