

The Practice of



Clinical Supervision

Nadine Pelling — John Barletta — Philip Armstrong

chapter **thirteen**

Who are Australian Counsellors and How Do They Attend to Their Professional Development?

Caleb Lack and Nadine Pelling

Australian counselling is still a developing profession and, as of 2008, three workforce surveys have been conducted in an effort to identify the characteristics of Australian counsellors and describe their activities. Two published workforce surveys used as their foci members of two different counselling organisations, the Australian Counselling Association (ACA) and the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) (Pelling, 2005; Schofield, 2008). The third published workforce survey examined individuals advertising themselves as counsellors in the *Australian Yellow Pages* (Pelling, Brear, & Lau, 2006). All three studies illustrate methodological strengths and limitations and purport to describe counsellors in Australia. In this chapter we compare and contrast the methods used and the results obtained in these published workforce surveys to date. Results show many similarities among the findings, possibly illustrating a fairly homogeneous group despite the different organisational affiliations/populations used to sample counsellors. It is suggested that a baseline description of Australian counsellors has thus been obtained and it is therefore recommended that counselling organisations in Australia, most notably the ACA and PACFA, work together to advance the profession as they appear to be representing similar groups of people. Recommendations for future counselling workforce surveys are provided and include a strong suggestion to survey larger samples of the counselling workforce in Australia. Accurate workforce descriptions can aid supervisors in providing targeted and appropriate supervision to specific groups of supervisees. Results regard-

ing counsellor participation in supervision and professional development activities are also presented.

Australian Counselling

Counselling is a developing profession without statutory regulation in Australia. Despite this, or maybe because of it, a number of organisations exist that purport to represent counselling and counsellors in Australia, each with differing educational and general membership requirements (Pelling, 2006; Pelling & Sullivan, 2006; Pelling & Whetham, 2006). For counsellors who do not affiliate with the psychological or social work professions there exist a number of specialty, state and national counselling organisations. This includes two primary national general counselling organisations: the Australian Counselling Association (ACA) and the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) (Armstrong, 2006; Pelling, 2006; Schofield, Grant, Holmes, & Barletta, 2006). The ACA represents approximately 3,000 individual counsellors (personal communication, P. Armstrong, April 28, 2008) and PACFA is an umbrella organisation that represents various member organisations (Schofield, 2008).

Historically, some have viewed the ACA and PACFA as competitors, despite one organisation being an individual membership association and the other a federation of medium- and smaller sized associations, respectively. However, currently the ACA and PACFA are working collaboratively to develop a joint register for counsellors to aid in their common goal of having counselling recognised as a profession by the Australian government for the purposes of government health (Medicare) service rebates (personal communication, P. Armstrong, April 28, 2008). This is a welcome development, one that was called for by Pelling and Sullivan (2006) in a special issue of the *International Journal of Psychology* on counselling in Australia.

With surveys available, and the two largest counselling organisations in Australia collaborating, it both became possible and was deemed timely to compare and contrast the methods and findings of the three published workforce surveys on Australian Counselling.

Method

Two clean copies of the three published workforce surveys were obtained. One set was provided to Dr Lack for methodological review and the other to Dr Pelling for a results comparison. As Dr Pelling is the lead author of two of the published workforce surveys under examination, it was deemed inappropriate for her to lead the methodological critique. Both of the individuals involved in this methodological and results comparison are employed as clinical psychologists in a university setting, with one having

published on the topic of Australian counselling previously. The methodological review examined general methodology/procedure, sample population and return rates. The results were compared regarding demographics, education and professional activities, and work settings.

Comparisons

All three recently published studies (Pelling, 2005; Pelling et al., 2006; Schofield, 2008) have attempted to identify who is providing service to the public using the term 'counsellor'. While all have relied on survey data to reach their conclusions, each has differed in terms of their methodology, sample population and other factors. The aim of this section is to provide a critique of the methods used, describe the differences and similarities of these studies, and provide information to assist in improving such research in the future. Following this methodological comparison, the results of the three workforce studies are compared. The chapter ends with a general description of Australian counsellors and some recommendations for counselling representation and future workforce studies.

Methodology

Studies will be discussed chronologically, with comparisons following. Pelling's (2005) article focused on self-identified members of the ACA. Using a similar survey to Pelling, Brear and Lau (2006), this article focused on gathering information from those ACA members who received the journal *Counselling Australia*, although those who received electronic communication from the ACA were also sent the survey. The survey asked about multiple demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, racial/ethnic group, religious affiliation and marital status), training and professional development, provision of services, involvement in professional organisations and comfort with six topics likely to be encountered by counsellors (i.e., use of electronic means to provide services, sexual orientation issues, service provision to Indigenous populations, and comfort treating depression, anxiety and substance use). The data were collected over a 1-month period in April 2004, with no reported follow-ups or reminders to increase the return rate. A total of 241 (out of 1,000) responses were received from those who were given the survey through the mail, with only 48 (out of 2,000) responses from those who received the electronic communication. These 48 were excluded from all analyses.

Pelling, Brear, and Lau's (2006) article used a highly similar survey, but did not report questions concerning comfort level with likely encountered issues. For their sample, the respondents were drawn from those persons who advertised themselves as counsellors in the *Australian Yellow Pages*, with a total of 587 surveys sent to a randomly selected portion of all advertised counsellors across the country. These data were collected

between March and April 2004 and used a specified reminder procedure to increase return rate (see below). A total of 317 (out of 510 deliverable surveys) were returned to the authors.

Schofield (2008) focused on members of PACFA member associations for her research. All 41 PACFA member associations, approximately 3,000 persons in total, were involved in this survey. The survey itself had 48 questions that covered multiple areas: limited demographic information (i.e., gender and age), priorities for the future of PACFA, work setting, experience and training background, involvement in professional organisations, professional development activities, work setting and practices, and information about private practice. In Schofield's (2008) study, data were also collected during 2004, with the first mailings occurring in January and stretching over the next 6 months, during which 'several e-mail reminders' (Schofield, 2008, p. 6) were sent to the PACFA member associations. A total of 316 surveys were returned out of over 3,000 sent; only 122 identified themselves as counsellors or psychotherapists, corresponding to a return rate of 10.5%.

As can be seen, all studies focused on self-reported survey data. In addition, all three studies, despite their varied publication dates, collected their survey data in the first half of 2004. Of the three, two (Pelling, 2005; Schofield, 2008) focused on members of a particular organisation and only one attempted a random sample of counsellors (Pelling et al., 2006), although this was drawn from those advertised as providing counselling services in a telephone directory. As such, each of these studies has threats to the ability to generalise to the total population of self-identified counsellors. The low rates of returned surveys for the two studies focusing on members of the ACA and PACFA could indicate high rates of self-selection, particularly given the high rates of advanced degrees (masters or doctoral, see below) in both samples. Given that counselling is a nonregulated profession, the random sampling method used (Pelling et al., 2006) likely represents a more accurate assessment of the population in question.

Also concerning in terms of applicability to wider samples and populations is the fact that two of the studies had very low return rates (10% or less of total sample for Pelling, 2005; Schofield, 2008), even though the information was requested under the auspices of an organisation to which the persons belonged. The third used multiple mailings to gather information and remind people to return the survey, resulting in a much higher return rate (62.2%; Pelling et al., 2006). Again, this contributes to this study being more likely representative of the counsellor population as a whole. It is also important to note that, as the total estimated number of counsellors in Australia is over 16,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics,

2003), each study has sampled only a tiny percentage of the total counsellors in the nation — from 0.008% (Schofield, 2008) to 0.015% (Pelling, 2005) to 0.019% (Pelling et al., 2006). Thus, although all three publications represent workforce surveys, none could be said to profile the actual profession of counselling in Australia. Instead, the surveys appear to simply describe, to varying degrees of accuracy, specific sections of the profession.

A last fact concerning the accuracy of these three studies on reflecting the counselling population as a whole concerns the types of persons sampled. Each study had widely varying rates of other types of mental health professionals who responded to the survey as a counsellor. For example, Pelling (2005) had 4.1% of her sample comprising psychologists, while psychologists made up 41.9% and 6.5% of the other studies (Pelling et al., 2006 and Schofield, 2008, respectively). Also, the Schofield (2008) study included social workers (5.7%), nurses (9.8%) and medical practitioners (0.8%) in the sample. In addition, the Pelling (2005) and Schofield (2008) studies included students in their sample, at quite different rates (16.6% and 1.7%, respectively). This, combined with the differences in rates of regulated professions described above, undoubtedly impacted the findings on educational level, possibly resulting in under- (Pelling, 2005) and overestimation (Schofield, 2008) of the average educational qualifications held by counsellors.

In future research, using a randomised sample, similar to that used by Pelling et al. (2006), is highly recommended. Going beyond only sampling those who are advertised in the *Yellow Pages* should be undertaken, as anyone is able to call themselves a counsellor due to the nonregulated status of the term. Such work could involve focusing on one particular city or state/territory, starting with those who advertise their services in the phone directories, but also asking those who are advertised if they are aware of any counsellors who do not advertise in the directory. Also, obtaining lists from the city government of all persons listed as having permits to operate within the city in a counselling capacity, if possible, might allow for a wider sampling of people providing counselling services. Surveys of the major counselling organisations (such as ACA or PACFA) should also be repeated, with a focus on getting much higher rates of returned information to gain a better understanding of the members. Alternatively, these organisations could require all members, either joining for the first time or renewing their membership, to complete a survey as part of their application packet. Lastly, a survey that attempts to gather information from a larger percentage of the total counsellor population should be undertaken, as the current surveys have all surveyed much less than 1% of the total populace.

Results

Demographics

In spite of the differences in sampling techniques and populations, much information can be gained by comparing the results of these three studies. Perhaps the most glaring similarity across the studies was the demographic results. For all, a vast majority of the respondents were female (between 70.3% and 78%) and middle-aged (mean ages between 49 and 53 years old). Those studies that reported on other demographics (Pelling, 2005; Pelling et al., 2006) found a majority of the sample to be married or partnered (66.8% and 75.7%), heterosexual (90.5% and 93.4%), and living in urban environments (69.3% and 73.8%) in New South Wales (28.2% and 30.6%) or Victoria (24.1% and 28.4%). In terms of racial characteristics, both studies reported a majority of Caucasians, although Pelling (2005) reported only 14.9% of her sample identifying as such, while the other study reported 86.1% of respondents identifying as Caucasian (Pelling et al., 2006). Similarly, both reported a preponderance of religious affiliations being Christian, at rates of 7.5% (Pelling, 2005) and 55.8% (Pelling et al., 2006). As noted in the methodology section above, the Pelling (2005) and Pelling et al. (2006) studies provided greater detail regarding the demographic characteristics of the samples than the Schofield (2008) study.

Education and Professional Activities

Training and education results across the three studies differed significantly. For baccalaureate, master's, and doctorate degrees, Pelling (2005) found rates of 34.4%, 18.3%, and 4.6% respectively; Pelling et al. (2006) found rates of 36.9%, 31.2%, and 8.8%; and Schofield (2008) found rates of 34.1% and 43.9% (master's/doctorate combined). The lower rates of higher education in the Pelling (2005) study may reflect that fact that over 16% of the sample comprised students and, thus, may be in the process of completing a degree. The Pelling (2005) and Pelling et al. (2006) studies reported similar rates of engaging in supervision, between 70% and 72%. Additionally, the Pelling (2005) and Pelling et al. (2006) studies report that conference attendance and reading books/journals are popular professional development activities, reported by 65–86% and 89–96% respectively. The top three journals in both the Pelling (2005) and Pelling et al. (2006) studies remained the same, although their order differed according to study: *Australian Psychologist*, *Counselling Australia* and *Psychotherapy in Australia*.

The average number of years working as a counsellor ranged from a low of 8.6 to a high of 14.8 in the Pelling (2005) and Pelling et al. (2006) studies respectively. The Schofield (2008) study indicated an average of 13 years. Given that there was a fairly significant number of students included

in the Pelling (2005) study, once again there appears to be a great deal of similarity among the samples in terms of counselling experience. The Pelling (2005) and Pelling et al. (2006) studies report individual (81–95% of the respondents engaged in individual counselling as a professional activity) and couple/family counselling was popular in all three surveys (51–70% engaged in this professional activity). Between 23–35% of respondents in all three surveys reportedly engaged in specialised practice.

One glaring difference in the results of the three studies was on theoretical orientation. For the Pelling (2005) and Pelling et al. (2006) studies the main theoretical influence was eclectic, with cognitive–behaviour or narrative influences. However, the Schofield (2008) study reported a preponderance of psychoanalytic theorists. It is not possible to know why this difference specifically exists but this may identify a point of real divergence between the samples and thus populations examined.

Work Setting

Solo private practice was a popular activity with 43% to 63% of the respondents in the three studies working in this setting. Income information was not reported in the Schofield (2008) study, however the respondent in the sample reported, on average, holding 1.7 employment positions. The Pelling (2005) and Pelling et al. (2006) studies reported samples that indicated an average salary of \$40,000 or less per year, with an average fee between \$58 and \$80 an hour, respectively.

Discussion

As of 2008, three counselling workforce surveys have been conducted and published in Australia. The current examination shows that all of these studies sampled only a very small proportion of the ABS-reported number of counsellors in Australia. The studies themselves vary regarding the sampling procedures used, participants used as the foci for their data collection and return rate obtained. Nevertheless, great similarities are reported in the results of all three studies.

Who are Australian counsellors? Generally speaking, Australian counsellors are women of middle-age. They tend to be married or in a partnered relationship, heterosexual and living in urban environments. In terms of education, most counsellors tend to hold some type of baccalaureate degree. Differences in reported postgraduate (master's/doctorate) degrees existed and are likely to be a result of studies including/excluding students, in addition to the inclusion of members of regulated professions thus seemingly lowering/artificially raising the educational levels reported. A fuller examination of educational level obtained in terms of specific counselling (vs. psychological) training and examination of

degrees in progress versus obtained degrees could be illuminative in regards to the educational levels held by Australian counsellors, especially those counsellors who do not identify with a different, regulated profession (e.g., psychologists).

Similarities were also demonstrated between studies in terms of supervisory activities, professional development activities and experience level. Indeed, counsellors in Australia appear to have a fairly high level of experience in terms of years of practice, with about a decade being fairly standard. Once again, similarities existed in professional activities including the popularity of individual as well as couple/family counselling. Differences were reported in terms of theoretical orientation with eclectic/cognitive–behavioural and psychoanalytic theories being reported by the Pelling (2005) as well as Pelling et al. (2006) studies and the Schofield (2008) research, respectively.

Conclusion

Due to the similarities in the findings obtained by the three published Australian counselling workforce surveys, we propose that a baseline description of Australian counsellors has been obtained. As a result, it might be in the best interest of the Australian counselling industry to have the ACA and PACFA work together, as they are reported to be doing currently, as what will benefit one group is likely to benefit the other (personal communication, P. Armstrong, April 14, 2008; Pelling & Sullivan, 2006).

Future counselling workforce surveys are encouraged to focus on increasing, first, the return rate obtained possibly by using a mult mailing technique, such as that engaged by Pelling et al. (2006). Second, a wider sampling of the existing number of counsellors in Australia needs to be obtained in any future survey. As a result, surveys may best avoid focusing on one specific association's membership or one limited listing of counsellors but employ a snowballing technique to sample a large number of counsellors who could be contacted by various methods.

Regardless, Australian counselling can be said to be developing smoothly with a number of published workforce surveys and the two main representative counselling bodies in Australia now working in collaboration.

Educational Questions and Activities

1. True or False: The three published workplace surveys of Australian counsellors show more similarities than differences.
A. true.

2. List one main difference found among the three discussed workplace surveys.
 - theoretical orientation.
3. Is your favourite journal listed among the most popular for Australian counsellors?
4. Describe the general Australian counsellor in terms of demographic characteristics.
 - Generally speaking, Australian counsellors are women of middle-age. They tend to be married or in a partnered relationship, heterosexual and living in urban environments. In terms of education, most counsellors tend to hold some type of baccalaureate degree.

Selected Internet Resources

- Australian Counselling Association
<http://www.theaca.net.au>
- Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australasia
<http://www.pacfa.org.au>

Selected References for Further Reading

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