The Person-in-Environment Perspective

A study of the lived experience of practitioners working in a counselling role in the Western Australian prison system

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This thesis is submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Social Work and Social Policy
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24 August 2018
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I, Deborah Denton, certify that:

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Date: 24 August 2018
Abstract

The Person-In-Environment Perspective

The voice and experience of ‘frontline’ practitioners engaged in counselling and rehabilitative work with prisoners in custodial settings is mostly absent from the correctional literature. Although research on working with prisoners exists, the focus is often on outcomes and reduced reconviction rates, rather than the place of the practitioner in the counselling process. This research sought to address this significant gap and specifically explore the ways in which practitioners working in the role of ‘prison counsellor’ in Western Australian (WA) prisons articulate their experience and their understanding of their professional identity. A thematic analysis of the perceptions of prison counsellors using information collected in the interviews provided the data of the lived experience.

The theoretical framework used to shape the study is based on Thompson’s conceptualisation—the Personal Cultural Structural (PCS) analysis—and the concept of embedment. As a framework located within an existentialist ontology, it enables a three-dimensional exploration of people’s identity and of what it means ‘to be’ a prison counsellor in the WA prison system within the current historical context. In focusing on the iterative relationship between the person, their community and society, the framework helps to provide a broader understanding of the psychological and sociopolitical factors that impact on prison counsellors’ practice in an otherwise neglected area of research.

Thematic analysis of the data suggested that prison counsellors were embedded within a system and environment that was ‘testing’, due primarily to the fact that prisons serve two purposes, security and control, and treatment and rehabilitation of prisoners. The opposing ideologies of imprisonment and counselling resulted in strained interpersonal relationships at times between prison counsellors and custodial staff. Further, it created anxiety for some counsellors as they endeavoured to operationalise a remedial role in an adverse prison environment. The role responsibilities of prison counsellors varied between prison settings and the guidelines for the service were not clearly defined. The organisational focus on risk management over counselling of prisoners resulted in professional discord for some participants. The off-site location of the governing body
for the Prison Counselling Service resulted in counsellors feeling unsupported by management.

The diverse range of participant responses suggested that there was no ‘neat’ or ‘simple’ way to describe counsellors’ experience. This was clearly a group of people who were committed to their work and who had found many aspects personally and professionally rewarding despite the difficult circumstances in which they worked. Some people stood out more than others as possessing critical personal strengths that equipped them to manage the stresses of the role. The findings indicated that this variation was reflective of both existential and experiential factors, and structural and cultural influences within specific prisons.
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<table>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Criminology</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARMS</td>
<td>At Risk Management System</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASPM</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent Prisoner Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBT</td>
<td>Cognitive Behavioural Therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCP</td>
<td>Department of Child Protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCS</td>
<td>Department of Corrective Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>ERA</td>
<td>Economic Regulation Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>FCMT</td>
<td>Forensic Case Management Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OICS</td>
<td>Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCS</td>
<td>Personal Cultural Structural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PrCS</td>
<td>Prison Counselling Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRAG</td>
<td>Prisoner Risk Assessment Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAMS</td>
<td>Support and Monitoring System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO</td>
<td>Senior Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMF</td>
<td>Statement of Material Facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPT</td>
<td>Suicide Prevention Taskforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
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</table>
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Disclaimer: As the study reflects on people’s individual perspectives, it cannot be regarded as representative of the views of all departmental staff, nor of the Department. Further, the issues discussed in this study pertain specifically to prison counselling practices at the time of the data collection stage (2010–2011) and it is recognised that many of the issues identified may have since been addressed. Any errors of omission or commission are acknowledged as the responsibility of the researcher.
**Glossary**

**ARMS:** The At Risk Management System—a system designed to assist in the identification and management of prisoners at risk to self.

**At risk prisoner:** A prisoner considered at risk of self-harm or assault from other prisoners or one who has a potentially harmful medical condition.

**Lockdown:** A prison lockdown refers to situations in which all prisoners are kept in their cells due to staff shortages or incident. No visits by families or external workers.

**Offender:** An adult person subject to a current community-based corrections service order (including bail supervision by Corrective Services).

**Prisoner:** A person with a court-issued authority held in full-time custody under the jurisdiction of an adult corrective service agency. An adult held in prison custody as per the *Prisons Act 1981.*

**Remand:** Holding a defendant in custody before their trial or sentencing.

**SAMS:** Relates to the Support and Monitoring System that provides a collaborative, coordinated approach to the identification of prisoners who are not an acute risk to self, but require additional support, management, intervention and/or monitoring within the prison environment.

**Sentenced:** A person serving a sentence issued by a court of law.

**Statement of material facts:** The prosecution document served upon an accused when charged with a criminal offence. This document describes the circumstances of the offence that has resulted in charges by police but does not contain the outcome of any subsequent court hearing.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

A fear of crime and feeling unsafe is a significant issue for many Australians. Nationally, a quarter of adults reported feeling unsafe in the community due to personal experience of crime, or perceptions based on media reports and social network influence (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2010). Roberts and Indermaur’s (2009) report of the 2007 Australian Survey of Societal Attitudes to crime and criminal justice revealed a similar trend in terms of public safety concerns and the effects of criminal activity. Most respondents perceived crime numbers in Australia as increasing, as well as the number of violent crimes reported to police. Despite international and Australian studies indicating that crime rates are in fact stable or declining (Australian Institute of Criminology [AIC], 2014; Davis & Dossetor, 2010), public perceptions of increasing crime rates remain and are arguably reasoned when considering Australia’s burgeoning prisoner population.

Over the last decade, Australia’s prison population has increased by more than 60 per cent, with federal government data indicating that more than 50,000 prisoners pass through the Australian correctional system each year (Adonis, 2013). This number is reported as increasing annually and as exceeding the growth rate in the Australian adult population in the same period. Between 2015 and 2016, the number of prisoners in adult corrective services custody nationwide increased by eight per cent, compared with a 1.5 per cent increase in the general population (ABS, 2016a). Prisoner recidivism figures are equally concerning, estimated at 45 per cent nationwide (AIC, 2014). Further, communities in Australia were reported as increasingly risk aversive and punitive in their attitude to offenders (Day, Casey, Vess, & Huisy, 2011), a determination matching community attitudes in other parts of the world (e.g., Malcolm, 2005; Roberts & Indermaur, 2009). In the Roberts and Indermaur (2009) report key findings included:

- 72 per cent of respondents thought that people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences.
- Australians had little or no confidence in the prison system as a means of deterring future offending (84.7 per cent), to rehabilitate prisoners (87.7 per cent) or as a form of punishment (59.2 per cent) (p. x).
In Western Australia (WA), a similar trend is evident in that the prisoner population has been steadily rising (see Table 1.1). In June 2016, the number of adult prisoners in WA prisons had increased by 14 per cent since the previous year—the highest percentage increase in prisoners for all states and territories.

Table 1.1: Western Australian Prisoner and General Population Growth (2009–2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>No. as at 2009</th>
<th>No. as at 2016</th>
<th>% Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prisoner (adult)</td>
<td>4,416</td>
<td>6,328</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>2,244,436</td>
<td>2,474,410</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Department of Corrective Services (2016b) and ABS (2009, 2016b)

This continued increase in prisoner numbers is significant in terms of the extent to which prisons can cope, and is a concern identified in several reports. For example, the Ombudsman’s enquiry into deaths in custody (Allen, 2000) described the system as ‘strained’ (p. 5). Similar concerns have been raised in more recent reports (e.g., Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services [OICS], 2016).

In addition, recidivism rates for the adult prisoner population in WA are concerning. The 2014–2015 figures show that 43 per cent of all prisoners returned to either prison or community corrections within two years of their release from prison (Economic Regulation Authority [ERA], 2015). A mounting prisoner population places increasing pressure on the agency responsible for managing offenders, which in WA and at the time of conducting this research was named the Department of Corrective Services (hereafter referred to as ‘the Department’ or DCS). The average annual operational cost to keep an adult prisoner incarcerated in a WA prison is approximately $117,530 and significantly more for a juvenile offender (DCS, 2016a; ERA, 2015). This figure (adult prisoners) is 20 per cent higher on average than in other states and territories, a factor attributable in part to the geography of WA and greater numbers of regional and remote prisons in WA than in other jurisdictions (ERA, 2015).

Within this broad societal context and rather bleak picture of booming prisoner populations and recidivism rates, there is some evidence in the literature of professional

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1 Figures as at end of June in respective years.
2 Agency name changed from the Department of Corrective Services to the Department of Justice on 1 July 2017.
3 The actual cost of keeping a young person in detention is documented as $991 per day ($361,715 per annum) (DCS, 2016a, p. 121).
intervention and approaches to working with prisoners that are believed to be effective in terms of rehabilitative outcomes and reducing reoffending. However, the range of studies and methodologies is varied and non-specific, measured mostly in broad terms related to reduced reconviction rates and prisoner re-entry assistance (Seiter & Kadel, 2003; Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). Thus, it is difficult to generalise the findings. Outcomes identified in many of these studies tend to be stated in terms of ‘aspirational goals’ or ‘wish lists’ (Beckett, 2006), rather than being clearly articulated, evidence-informed outcomes. In addition, the intervention emphasis is often on programs and desired achievements from programs, with little, if any, exploration of the place of the practitioner in that process. Indeed, what is common to the literature is an absence of the practitioner voice and the relationship between practitioners and prisoners as perceived by practitioners. A detailed study that focuses on the views and experiences of frontline practitioners, as articulated by practitioners, would allow for a fuller understanding of what ‘effective’ work with prisoners might look like.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The proposed research addresses this significant gap in the existing literature by exploring how practitioners working in a counselling role in a prison system perceive the work that they do. It aims to explore important questions regarding best practice when working with prisoners and is based on the conviction that too little is known descriptively of the nature of prison counselling work from the perspective of the counsellor and of what counsellors seek to achieve in their interactions with prisoners. It specifically focuses on how the work impacts on counsellors as people and what, if any, personal, professional and organisational influences facilitate or impede counsellors’ ability to do their work. It focuses on these issues because from personal experience and from an examination of both corrections and counselling literature, it is clear to me that prisons are places of tension and adversity for all involved. Therefore, workers’ self-perception in this context is a significant factor that influences the service they provide.

Few studies, if any, have considered prison counsellors’ sense-making processes in terms of managing adversity and the work that they do in prisons. The focus in the corrections literature, as will be explored more fully in Chapter 2, is often on the client and practice outcomes, in terms of prisoner recidivism rates, rather than the place of the practitioner in the counselling process. What is mostly missing from the literature is the embodied understanding and perspectives of people seeking to make sense of their
work, rather than the perspectives of people who write about prison counselling work and who are, in a sense, observers. A key aspect of this research is to expose and understand any contradictions that may exist between what is desirable and actual practice and, if identified, to add to the construction of knowledge regarding prison counselling so that theory remains attuned to the needs of actual practice and practice advanced accordingly.

Working in prisons is emotionally and intellectually demanding for a variety of reasons, foremost of which is that large numbers of people are held captive against their will (Crawley, 2004). Practitioners are exposed to written material of a highly confidential and sensitive nature and the duties and responsibilities associated with forensic interviewing, individual counselling and group work facilitation can be stressful at times (Perron & Hiltz, 2006). Staff are placed in an ambiguous position in that prisons currently are required to function in different capacities (i.e., in the traditional role as an institution concerned with security and control but also increasingly with treatment and rehabilitation) (Crawley, 2004). Practitioners are required to operate within, and move between, this binary disjuncture and balance the tensions between inherent uncertainties involved in professional practice with the strategies adopted by the organisation (Senior & Loades, 2008).

Further, the role of a prison counsellor is complicated by the current performance-driven culture which sees an increased emphasis on throughput and accountability rather than therapeutic process and effective practice (Ruch, Turney, & Ward, 2010). As noted by Jones (2000), the ‘vocational ethic in human services’ (p. 374) work, which anticipates that frontline staff make a difference in people’s lives, compounds the dynamic tension between authority/control/statutory duties and creative non-directive work with prisoners. This study explores the tension between the dual responsibilities of regulation and ‘therapeutic’ intervention, as articulated by practitioners working in a system frequently under scrutiny from media sources and the community for its alleged shortcomings.

The prison counsellors who participated in this research are located in WA and work for the WA Department of Corrective Services. The study is not a critique of the WA prison system; it reflects on people’s individualised perspectives of how they make sense of their job in the prison system. It does not claim to be representative of the views of all people or of the reality of what working in a prison entails. This is a located
understanding of the views of professionals about the work that they do. It is hoped that the information obtained may provide insights into how people are best equipped to fit the needs of prisoners and broader society.

1.3 Motivation for the Study

My interest in the topic began as a student social worker during field placement in a prison when I was provided with the opportunity to ‘sit in’ and observe practitioners counselling prisoners. I was curious about the different approaches to practice I observed, some of which I perceived as more effective than others. Further, some workers appeared more at ease during their interactions with prisoners than did others. Although my observations only provided a snapshot of counsellors working within the WA prison system, the experience prompted my interest in the subject of effective professional practice. This interest was catalysed while attending a mental health conference as part of my university education. A speaker (psychiatrist) at the conference asserted that the sign of a true professional was the ability to ask the question ‘but is this treatment actually working?’ (Corrigan, 2007): a statement and question I interpreted as synonymous with, and referring to, the broad term ‘effective practice’. My interest in this topic and the notion of a self, or a distinct individuality as a synthesising factor in practice, continued to grow until its subsequent inception as a research project a year later. Having qualified as a social worker and joined the Department of Corrective Services in 2008 as a senior clinical interventions officer, I determined to explore what effective practice might ‘look like’ from the perspective of the practitioner and ideally, what could be learnt from this knowledge and subsequently embraced in practice.

Thus, when commencing the research, I had an ‘insider’ (Shaw & Lunt, 2011) role and insider knowledge as a member of the professional group responsible for providing what are deemed as therapeutic interventions to prisoners. My insider knowledge afforded me the advantage of a pre-existing understanding and familiarity with the research topic as well as access to practitioners working in a therapeutic/rehabilitative role with prisoners. The challenge for me as an insider was to achieve sufficient distance from the topic of this study—to examine it critically and analytically and to identify my taken-for-granted knowledge. For the purposes of the research, I sought to make myself more ‘outside’ than inside and chose to work with practitioners who were

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4 Title subsequently changed to senior programs officer in April 2009.
in a different role from me to maximise the chances of having a dialogue about role, yet without becoming enmeshed in it. The staff who best fit the research criteria were Prison Counselling Services (PrCS) staff: practitioners engaged in individual, face-to-face counselling with prisoners.

My role as a researcher, and as an insider (practitioner), have much in common in that both roles recognise and utilise ‘the dialogic nature of knowing’ for trying to make sense of the world and for ‘meaning making in the world’ (Butt & Parton, 2005, p. 2). However, the roles of researcher and participant ultimately emerge from ‘different motivations, political positions and interests’ (Took & Fook, 2001, p. 122). The question of ‘who benefits’ from the research project and whether it contributes to social change is identified as an important ethical research concern (Riessman, 2008). In this study, participants were speaking for themselves in ‘the first voice’ (Weick, 2000, p. 398) as to how they made sense of their role in a prison system. From their collective voices, it was hoped that a new story could be told, one that enabled staff involved in therapeutic/remedial/educative work with vulnerable people to recognise the strengths in their practice.

Therefore, the focus of exploration evolved from my direct experience as a practitioner/senior programs officer with the Department, facilitating group programs with offenders in WA metropolitan prisons, to my role as researcher. When I began the study in 2009, although of mature age, I was a new practitioner and a new researcher. As someone who, since starting in the prison system, has experienced some ambiguity and tension while seeking to operationalise a remedial role in a regulatory environment, I became aware of a range of issues I decided required in-depth consideration. This was for my own sake but also to explore how other corrective services personnel (colleagues/other professionals) engaged in therapeutic roles, defined, experienced and managed this role (or not). As an insider, I hoped my insights would provide a tentative set of propositions that would guide the ongoing process of insight into counselling prisoners. The ‘insider’ role is explored further in Chapter 3.

1.4 Perspectives in which the Study is Located

The thesis, in essence, is a philosophical consideration because it explores questions related to meaning, purpose and motivation in the context of prison counselling. As stated, the study is based on my conviction that too little is known descriptively of the
nature of prison counselling and too many unanswered existential questions remain regarding practitioners’ individual characteristics and qualities that help to sustain them (or not) when working in a prison. The study examines the variables that keep practitioners coming back to a work environment that could be described as one of adversity for both prisoners and practitioners, and what interpretations can be made from the stories practitioners tell. Through raising awareness of many of the issues involved (in prison counselling) as perceived by the participants, this research can play a small part in helping to move towards achieving advanced levels of practice.

The overarching framework for the study is existentialism, a philosophy of lived experience, and one which facilitates the exploration of ‘beingness’ in the world and the existentialist challenges that people face. The method of enquiry is qualitative, as the research is exploratory and descriptive: an exploration of values, processes, experiences, language and meanings. The qualitative approach allows for rich, thick descriptions of stories from the field to be included in the study. Through dialogue, practitioners were afforded the opportunity to narrate their own story and describe their experience of working in a custodial setting. Based on the words used by participants that represent ‘the complexities of practice most closely’, the research provided an opportunity to ‘name the competencies of expert practice’ (Took & Fook, 2001, p. 120).

1.5 Organisation of Thesis

This thesis comprises nine chapters. This chapter provides an overview and the purpose of the research project is outlined, including relevant background information and the motivation for the study. Chapter 2 presents the context and examines the broad issues related to undertaking a counselling role in a prison setting. This includes societal perspectives and the dominant discourses that inform the role prisons play, as well as the issues faced by counsellors working in this context as identified in the literature. The chapter discusses the extent to which these perceptions reflect the embodied perspective of counsellors.

Chapter 3 outlines the philosophical underpinnings and theoretical perspectives informing the study and the research approach, the tools and procedures used to collect the data, and the theory and ethical considerations that guided the analytical decisions. In describing these processes, the theoretical model used to shape and manage the research findings—Thompson’s (1998) Personal Cultural Structural (PCS) analysis—
and how this model served to structure and present the findings chapters, is outlined. My role as an insider-researcher and the practical measures taken to mitigate the challenges associated with the dual insider-outsider role are also discussed.

The research findings are presented in Chapters 4–7 in accordance with Thompson’s theoretical model. Chapter 4 focuses on the personal–structural interface and the organisational context within which prison counsellors operate and the Prison Counselling Service is embedded. The chapter discusses how institutional arrangements and structural variations across prison sites determine how the service is configured and counsellors’ role responsibilities defined. Further, it explores how these differences affect prison counsellors’ practice and their sense of ‘fit’ within this system.

Chapter 5 examines the cultural context and the nexus of staff relationships that impact on counsellors’ ability to operationalise their role: the personal–professional–cultural interface. The chapter discusses how these relationships were perceived by participants as assisting or hindering their capacity to implement their counselling role. In Chapter 6, the research lens focuses on the central element of Thompson’s model—the personal and professional domain—and considers the counsellor–prisoner working relationship and prison counsellors’ individual understandings of, approaches to, and hoped for outcomes from their interactions with prisoners. It examines the internal and external factors that impact on counsellors’ ability to establish a meaningful connection with a prisoner and the criteria applied by participants for evaluating effective practice. The focus narrows in Chapter 7 to counsellors’ self-perceptions of how working in a prison system affected their personal and professional lives and the mediating factors, both internal and external, that sustained their sense of self (or not) in the role.

Chapter 8 brings the findings of the study together and reflects on the key themes that emerged in light of counsellors’ structural and cultural embedment within the WA system. Chapter 9 provides the conclusion and overall summary of the thesis; the aim of which was to include the voice of the practitioner clearly in the frame and identify what can be learnt and taken forward into practice.
Chapter 2: Background

Working with people who have broken the law is recognised as a particularly challenging activity. Counselling in the context of a prison is identified as a more serious and difficult undertaking than, for instance, counselling people in the community (Polizzi & Draper, 2010). Although there are many settings in which counselling is used with offenders, performing a remedial role in a prison, where dual responsibilities of security and rehabilitation coexist, is described as ethically and personally demanding (Jones, 2012).

Chapter 2 aims to provide a context for the present study based on the literature (including grey literature) and my experience as an employee of the WA prison system. The chapter covers five broad topics:

i. the place of prisons in society in terms of their origins, evolution and the dominant discourses informing the notion of imprisonment
ii. key issues and challenges associated with prison counselling
iii. an overview of the prison system in WA, including past and present arrangements for its overall management, with a focus on the Department of Corrective Services
iv. factors contributing to the establishment of the WA Prison Counselling Service and issues associated with its current structure and role
v. the extent to which the various issues and perspectives identified within each of the above reflect the embodied perspective of counsellors themselves and the rationale for the study.

It should be noted that for the purpose of this study, the term ‘prison’ is used, unless the words ‘gaol’ or ‘jail’ occur in citations. In Australia, the words prison and gaol (jail) are often used interchangeably in the literature, with the word ‘prison’ defined in the Standard Guidelines for Corrections in Australia (AIC, 2012) as ‘any building, enclosure or place legally declared to be a prison for the lawful custody of persons committed by lawful authority’ (p. 5).
2.1 The Place of Prisons in Society

2.1.1 Origins and Evolution

The system of imprisonment currently operating in Western society has evolved over more than 200 years as one of the main ways of dealing with criminals and as a response to criminal behaviour. Approaches to dealing with criminals in the past have ranged from brutal punishments such as floggings, hangings and mutilations, to the warehousing of prisoners, to the present system of managing prisoners with a focus on their rehabilitation within a contained setting separated from the community. This shift towards a more humane treatment of prisoners began in the eighteenth century, when moral and evangelical dimensions began to emerge through charity organisations and debates on the treatment or reform of prisoners concerned with a just balance between a crime and its punishment (Steding, 1996). During this period, protests and public petitions against torture and public executions were made and reformists campaigned for the abolition of capital punishment. The decline of public castigation resulted in a shift from physical punishment of individuals to incarceration and with the latter considered ‘the gentle way in punishment’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 104). History indicates that shifts in public sentiment that occur periodically and result in either more humane or punitive treatment of prisoners reflect the prevailing penal philosophy of the time (Steding, 1996; Sun, 2013).

2.1.2 Dominant Discourses

‘The prison institution has always been a focus of concern and debate.’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 235)

Michel Foucault’s indelible contribution to the notion of discourse is particularly relevant when discussing the dominant discourses informing the concept of imprisonment. As O’Shaughnessy and Stadler (2012) observed, Foucault argued that discourses are always linked with systems of power relations and used as a ‘means of organising and transmitting social control’ (p. 173). A major focus of Foucault’s work was on questioning how some discourses gained dominance and maintained authority over others. His work provides insight into the ways in which the modern criminal is produced and contributes practical critiques of penal institutions.

Foucault began writing in the early 1970s on the ways in which power and knowledge shape the different forms of discourse on punishment, namely ‘the scientifical-legal
complex’ (1979, p. 23), and which in turn shape social responses to crime. He claimed that these discourses can change over time, cohering and intertwining in several ways at different historical moments, thereby creating the potential for social change. Turkel (1990), for example, identified how discourses informing law and psychiatry combined to decide whether a perpetrator of crime was of ‘sound or unsound mind at the time of the act’ (p. 180).

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1979) referred to the numerous discourses ‘that the prison has given rise to’ (p. 30) and from which ‘the power to punish derives its bases, justifications and rules’ (p. 23). He also identified how these discourses came into conflict with each other as how best to deal with offenders with, as McHoul and Grace (1993) identify, the important point being that the methods and practices adopted produce the effect that aligns with the discourse considered as ‘truth’.

O’Shaughnessy and Stadler’s (2012) interpretation of Foucault’s work identified three discourses informing the notion of punishment and treatment of offenders. The religious and moral discourses, for example, focus primarily on notions of good and evil and on criminals as deserving either punishment or reward. Legal and medical discourses prioritise crime prevention and rehabilitation. In legal discourses, criminals are broadly defined as a danger to people and property, whereas in medical discourses criminals are typically objectified, regarded as either sick or healthy and, if diagnosed as sick, in need of cure and rehabilitation (O’Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2012).

Healy (2014) proposed a further discourse as operational within health and welfare institutions, specifically ‘neo-classical economics’ (p. 59), pointing out that it is often used as a basis for policy decisions around resource allocation, which subsequently impacts on professional practice. According to Healy, this discourse, otherwise referred to as ‘neo-liberalism’ or ‘economic rationalism’, features free market ideas, service delivery and performance measurement. It is an ideology that includes a preference for less government involvement in welfare provision to individuals perceived as a burden on the state and a drain on the economy. As Williams (1996) noted, in the context of a public welfare institution such as a prison system, funding originates primarily from the state and the ‘public purse’. Thus, resource allocation is more likely to ‘follow votes’ than it is client needs. Based on this premise, it can be argued that the introduction of commercial ideas into the public sector vis-à-vis the current global trend towards
economic rationalism will significantly affect policy decisions regarding resource distribution for treatment-oriented penology.

The dominant discourses informing the notion of imprisonment align with the primary aim of prisons in Western society, which is protection of the community through containment by keeping in custody those persons committed by the courts. There is also now a strong emphasis on prisoner rehabilitation, as previously stated, although it is a concept that is mostly undefined in the literature, having acquired an almost ‘taken-for-granted’ status. Rehabilitation is frequently used as a synonym for ‘treatment’ of offenders and consequently has attained a status associated with the medical discourse, albeit one that implies a norm against which offenders are evaluated (Feeley & Simon, 1992). For discussion purposes, the term is used in this research in accordance with Masters’s (1994) broad definition: ‘the restoration of the offender from a law-violating to a law-abiding person’ (p. 221).

Positive attitudes towards the efficacy of rehabilitation as a means of reducing reoffending prevailed during the first half of the twentieth century, when approaches towards criminality shifted to what Crow (2001) identified as the ‘rehabilitative ideal’. This view is characterised by its curative nature, with offenders regarded as passive recipients of intervention. This ‘ideal’ was superseded in the 1970s by the ‘nothing works’ view of rehabilitation initiatives following the findings of research studies in North America and the United Kingdom (UK). Writers such as Martinson (1974) claimed that there was no research basis for making recommendations about effective techniques to rehabilitate criminal offenders. Such views contributed to a devaluing of correctional interventions at the political level. The ‘nothing works’ credo remained prevalent until the late 1990s, when a revival of confidence in treatment and rehabilitation procedures began to emerge and the ‘what works’ movement developed. The ‘what works’ tenet, measured primarily in terms of reduced reconviction rates, was subsequently succeeded by a treatment approach to offending founded primarily on a medical discourse. While incorporating the basic characteristics of the ‘what works’ ethos, the rehabilitation of prisoners was recognised as a two-way process involving both the offender and society. The habilitation and rehabilitation of prisoners was deemed one of the main objectives of a modern prison system.

The twenty-first century has seen an overall ‘decline in rehabilitative optimism’ (Hayles, 2006, p. 67) and the resurgence and emphasis on ‘just deserts’ (sic) and a
‘doing the crime and doing the time’ approach (Sun, 2013). This shift towards a cultural context concerned with punishment and the distribution of blame has been attributed in part to the increasing occurrence of global terrorism following the events of 9/11 and re-emergence of fear as a dominant discourse (Hayles, 2006). The heightened sense of anxiety and insecurity across the world has been suggested as having resulted in more precautionary measures and practices being adopted in the treatment of offenders. It is driven by a fear of ‘what if’ (Kemshall, 1998, p. 278) and concern over those who pose a risk to society, rather than ‘what works’ (Hayles, 2006). Canton and Eadie (2004) described the purported shift in focus from welfare to justice to punishment as one which reflects an overall ambivalence regarding the purpose of prisons: between ‘punishing or helping, controlling or caring’ (p. 202). Moreover, Polizzi, Braswell and Draper (2014) argued that negative perceptions of offenders within society impede discussions that could otherwise outline the benefits of rehabilitation and ‘successful work in corrections’ (p. 4).

Despite a lack of consensus in research studies concerning the effectiveness of retribution or deterrence as a crime control strategy, disagreement continues to exist between the proponents and opponents of rehabilitation initiatives, with a ‘tough on crime’ approach remaining well supported (Sun, 2013). This discourse ambiguity influences perceptions of prisons and the social significance of imprisonment generally. It specifically impacts on prison counsellors in WA, who have the role of enacting some of the residual elements of socialisation, normalisation and humanisation but in a context in which punishment and retribution are key elements.

2.2 Prison Counselling: Issues and Challenges

The correctional literature is mostly consistent in identifying the overall mission of prison counselling as the same as that of other counselling professions and as referring to the provision of professional help and advice to clients to help resolve personal or psychological problems. However, several characteristics are identified as unique to the former and as making clinical work in a prison particularly challenging (Crawley, 2004; Elliott & Schrink, 2009; Huffman, 2006; Sun, 2013). These challenges relate not only to the context within which, and clientele with whom practitioners are required to work, but also to the complexities surrounding the nature of the counselling role, and to the potential impact on clinicians of working within a prison system. Although discussed separately, the interrelationship between the challenges identified is acknowledged.
2.2.1 The Setting

The physical setting of a prison can have a major influence on the effectiveness of the counselling encounter in terms of client and worker motivation to engage in a meaningful helping relationship and the broader success of worker/client interactions (Tangenberg & Kemp, 2002; Thompson, 2011). Mathias and Sindberg (1986) claimed that the problems facing counsellors in a prison system are ‘unequalled in any other setting’ (p. 7). Other authors referred to prisons as ‘paramilitary’ or ‘quasi-military’ operations (e.g., Elliott & Schrink, 2009; Williams, 1996), and as an environment that is ‘non-therapeutic’ and unconducive to counselling practice (Huffman, 2006). The latter author noted that the counselling space may be an office placed directly in front of the prison officer control booth, a hallway, plexiglass windows and bars, or a converted cell. The fact that large numbers of people are held captive against their will in a setting ‘policed’ by prison officers (Crawley, 2004; Elliott & Schrink, 2009; Huffman, 2006; Sun, 2013) adds an additional layer of complexity to the counsellor–prisoner exchange, and one absent from conventional counselling practices.

Erving Goffman’s seminal text Asylums (1968) and the notion of the total institution identified many issues relevant to the impact of the prison setting on counselling practice. Goffman (1968) described a total institution as a place where blocks of people segregated from the wider society live and work together and where their needs are governed ‘by the bureaucratic organisation’ (p. 18); that is, it is part residential community and part formal organisation. He categorised five types of total institution, all of which serve to protect the community against what were perceived as intentional dangers to it, with the welfare of the people necessarily constrained a secondary concern. Prisons were identified as one of these institutional types, along with penitentiaries, prisoner of war camps and concentration camps (Goffman, 1968).

Goffman (1968) maintained that the total institution is of particular sociological interest, as it served as ‘the forcing houses for changing persons’ within society and as ‘a natural experiment on what can be done to the self’ (p. 22). The processes of closely restricted control, which are in operation in the modern prison system, are notably like those that Goffman described as existing over half a century ago. As Goffman also described, a prisoner’s daily regime is tightly scheduled and monitored from above by prison authorities and is conducted in the same place as every other prisoner. The barriers to interaction with the outside world are clearly visible with the locked doors, high walls
and barbed wire, arguably the antithesis of a reformative/therapeutic setting. A counsellor is required to operate within this austere and rigid structure, and have a developed understanding of how this setting affects a prisoner’s personhood (Masters, 1994; Towl, Snow, & McHugh, 2002).

2.2.2 The Client Group: Involuntary, Potentially Dangerous

Several factors related to prisoners as the client group can also create additional challenges for counsellors beyond those that may be experienced by counsellors working with clients in the general community. These include the involuntary nature of the clientele and the obvious risks associated with working with individuals who are considered ‘dangerous’, or potentially so.

The counselling literature identifies the efficacy of any counselling exchange as reliant on the preparedness of the client to engage. However, the research that focuses on involuntary clients indicates that it is not reasonable to expect court-ordered clients such as prisoners to willingly enter, or engage in, the process of counselling, especially if prisoners are unused to this type of interaction and do not readily welcome increased attention. Further, Ivanoff, Blythe and Tripodi (1994) pointed out that offenders may view counsellors with distrust and suspicion, as authority figures who are part of a system with its own agenda. Counsellors may be perceived as unwanted intrusions into the lives of prisoners, who may not consider they need the help that the mandating agent perceives that they do, or be prepared to own their personal problems. Shaw (1974) argued that the benefits of engaging legally mandated clients in therapeutic intervention are questionable if clients are not motivated.

People who interact with counselling services in a prison are generally those who have behaved in ways that have caused harm to others and society in general (Houston, 1998). Some prisoner behaviour can be regarded as ‘dangerous’, or at least potentially so, in view of the crimes they have committed and/or their behaviour subsequent to their incarceration. For example, recent statistics published by the WA Department of Corrective Services for adult prisoners in custody show that 44 per cent of sentenced prisoners were convicted of offences against people: abduction/harassment; acts intended to cause injury; dangerous or negligent acts endangering persons; homicide and sexual assault (DCS, 2017). Further, several authors acknowledge the possibility of violence/physical attack from a prisoner as part of the daily agenda in a prison (Biemer,
Masters (1994) noted that counsellors work with some ‘severely disturbed’ prisoners who may pose a threat to their safety and therefore, counsellors ‘should always take the necessary steps to protect themselves’ before engaging with this client group (p. 51).

### 2.2.2.1. Establishing the Worker/Client Relationship

The working relationship between client and counsellor is identified in the literature as the fundamental driver for change in clients and as twice as significant as particular techniques or practice models (Flaskas, McCarthy, & Sheehan, 2007; Harvey & Smedley, 2010; Ross, Polaschek, & Ward, 2008; Ruch et al., 2010). This relationship, sometimes referred to as the ‘therapeutic alliance’ (Zetzel, 1956, p. 370) or ‘working alliance’ (Greenson, 1965, p. 155), may focus on either the process of relating per se or on the work done through the relationship and the outcomes to be achieved (Egan, 2010, p. 36). Therapeutic practices seek to enable clients to gain new insights and understandings via a process frequently referred to as a ‘talking cure’, a term typically associated with psychoanalysis and the work of Sigmund Freud, through the provision of a private space that makes it possible to do the exploration necessary for the client to heal (Huffman, 2006).

The prevailing paradigm when working with clients in general requires practitioners to engage empathically with their clients through active listening. Once trust and cooperation have been established in the relationship, the focus shifts to problem assessment and intervention and, eventually, to termination (Ivanoff et al., 1994). However, as Ivanoff et al. pointed out, some research indicates that mandated clients may not respond to the qualities regarded as necessary to ‘conventional’ practice approaches, such as practitioner warmth, genuineness and empathy. The suggestions offered by counsellors or the professional judgement provided may be perceived by prisoners as ‘meaningless’ (De Jong & Berg, 2001, p. 361) or as ‘tilted too far in favour of the organisation’ (Jones, Cooper, & Ferguson, 2008, p. 274). A counsellor is, therefore, placed in the difficult position of straddling conflicting goals: remaining in a professional role without ‘suffocating their personal selves’ and being perceived as a fellow human by the client (Harrison & Ruch, 2007, p. 41). Ruch, Turney and Ward (2010) pointed out that if the latter aspect is neglected, the likelihood of providing effective/authentic responses to a client may be compromised.
Some authors also highlighted the fact that vulnerable clients, such as prisoners, often have extensive histories of trust violations and negative experiences with welfare professionals (Cooper, Hetherington, & Katz, 2003; Kroll, 2010; Rooney, 2009). Consequently, prisoners are often unmotivated to engage in counselling. In addition, Morrison (2007) suggested that such clients are often ‘highly attuned to the emotional demeanour of others and with developed emotional antennae’ (p. 253). If these clients do engage, a period of intense ‘testing out’ of the practitioner frequently occurs (Kroll, 2010). Apart from the stress this can create for clinicians, there is no guarantee that the latter’s efforts to establish and maintain an ‘effective’ working relationship with their clients will be successful.

Haley (2010) argued that the main aim of therapeutic work in a prison is to help clients make sense of their painful and confusing narratives: an objective that generally requires considerable time. However, within a prison environment, factors such as limited staff resources, prison regimes, prisoner musters and unexpected prisoner lockdown periods can reduce opportunities for regular interactions and exploratory work with prisoners (Huffman, 2006; Masters, 1994). This frequently results in counsellors settling for an approach that Masters (1994) referred to as ‘putting out fires’ (p. 11) and can be frustrating for workers whose practice focus and preference is for longer-term, exploratory work.

### 2.2.3 Defining the Counselling Activity: Ambiguity and Misunderstanding

Brearley (1995) argued that the precise meaning of ‘counselling’ is often unclear in the literature, having become a ‘catchword’ covering a range of interventions including therapeutic, educational, financial and marital, while the ‘real’ nature of the activity remains obscured (p. 134). For counsellors working in a prison context, this lack of clarity surrounding its specific nature and purpose creates an additional challenge.

In the criminal justice literature, several definitions are used to describe the activity of prison counselling.⁵ For example, Hatcher (1978, as cited in Kratcoski, 1989) provided one broad definition: ‘the application of validation techniques designed specifically for bringing about a predictable change in criminal and delinquent behaviour’ (p. 139). However, Williams (1996) argued that ‘the careless use’ of the term is particularly ‘acute’ in the context of criminal justice settings (p. 77). This misuse has been attributed

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⁵ For example, casework counselling, correctional counselling and offender counselling.
to the general misapplication of the word by ‘non-specialists’ and as serving to bestow any activity of an advisory or persuasive manner with ‘an innocent and reassuring sound’ (Woolfe et al., 1989, as cited in Williams, 1996). Williams pointed out that this creates suspicion among offenders, given that techniques employed as part of ‘prison counselling’ in the past have included authoritarian and interrogatory approaches and, in some cases, electric shock treatment. He argued that it is unsurprising that offenders are suspicious of an activity identified as ‘counselling’. If Williams’ assertions are accurate, it can also be argued that such distrust creates an obstacle for prison counsellors being able to engage with their clients, one not typically associated with counselling clients in the community.

2.2.4 Need for a Unique Approach

Several writers have suggested that the specific challenges associated with prison counselling work necessitate an approach appropriate to ‘the unique behaviour context of the prison and the inmates within it’ (Scharf, Dindinger, & Vogel, 1983, p. 39). Literature regarding ‘what works’ (or not) is rarely considered in relation to a prison setting or prisoner population, but assumes a context of counselling voluntary clients. According to Huffman (2006), practitioners working in prisons have most likely been trained in therapies and ways of thinking about their clients that are primarily suited to the ‘free world’ (p. 321). Van Voorhis and Salisbury (2013) argued that basic counselling principles and techniques are ‘woefully inadequate’ (p. 26) in the context of offender treatment. This view is shared by Elliott and Schrink (2009), who also noted that prison counsellors new to the role are often cautioned to forget all they have learnt about customary counselling techniques, as traditional strategies are dismissed as either irrelevant, ineffective or susceptible to manipulation by prisoners.

The corrections literature is uniform in acknowledging that working with prisoners requires a different approach from methods used to engage someone who has sought professional help of their own volition in the community. This endeavour is also identified as complicated. Some practice approaches are believed to have some efficacy in the treatment of offenders, although most research evidence focuses on community based offenders and/or prison treatment programs. These approaches include problem solving and pro-social modelling (e.g. Bonta & Andrews, 2017; Dowden & Andrews, 2004; Trotter, 2015) and interventions based on cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) (Bonta & Andrews, 2017; Day et al., 2011; Houston, 1998; McMackin, Tansi, &
Lafratta, 2004; Trotter, 2015). However, Elliott and Schrink (2009) argued that there is no ‘magic bullet’ for ‘effectively’ treating offenders. The lack of a sound theoretical base is a particular concern (Scharf, Dindinger, & Vogel, 1983), as is the lack of evidence regarding the relationship between specific intervention strategies and reduced recidivism rates (Whiteley & Hosford, 1983).

In human service organisations, there is increasing emphasis placed on the importance of evidence-based practice, as reflected in the extensive body of extant literature. However, in counselling, the opinion of several authors is that the current climate and focus on evidence-based practice and empirically validated treatments can be counter/hostile to thoughtful practice and reflective opportunities (e.g., Ruch et al., 2010; Shaw, 2009). It is also criticised for encouraging a focus on outcomes and ‘performative concepts’ rather than relationship-based practices (Ruch et al, 2010, p. 241). This seems to imply that evidence-based practice tends to deal with social and behavioural issues as if they are measurable and predictable and the inferences for practice indisputable and obvious. As Ife (1997) argued, an empirical approach may divert attention from the ‘the importance of the person’ and from suffering and oppression, which are, in his view, ‘the most significant aspects of human life’ (p. 46).

2.2.5 Impact of the Role on the Clinician

There is a substantial body of literature describing the negative impact of working in prisons (e.g., Crawley, 2004; Elliott & Schrink, 2009; Polizzi & Draper, 2010; Towl, 2006) in situations identified as unpleasant or difficult. The subject of stress, emotional burnout and vicarious trauma among human services staff who work with involuntary clients such as prisoners is well documented (Morrison, 2007; Perron & Hiltz, 2006; VanDeusen & Way, 2006). Further, the duties and responsibilities associated with counselling in a prison setting are identified as particularly stressful (Perron & Hiltz, 2006).

As part of their role, prison counsellors are exposed to written and verbal material that can be emotionally and psychologically disturbing, information that is arguably not the norm in the context of conventional counselling practice. In addition, the complexity of some prisoner presentations may threaten workers’ ‘sense of clinical competency and ethical courage’ (Polizzi & Draper, 2010, p. 24). Working with prisoners suffering from hopelessness and despair, for example, can incite feelings of incompetence in
practitioners, as well as ‘frustration, anger, desperation or futility’ (Towl et al., 2002, p. 100). Practitioners may also struggle to sustain a positive outlook if treatment outcomes are measured primarily in terms of recidivism rather than in terms of other therapeutic goals, and hence are faced with what Polizzi and Draper (2010) referred to as ‘clinical failures’ (p. 24).

Although working directly with offenders is generally acknowledged as potentially stressful, some studies identify organisational factors as the main cause of stress among practitioners rather than the nature of the work itself (Crawley, 2004; Mawby & Worrall, 2013). Williams (1996) argued that ‘counselling is marginalised in criminal justice settings’, a factor he attributes partly to the occupational culture within the prison system, which he described as ‘male-dominated … and macho’ (p. 32), but also to political factors regarding how resources are prioritised. Counsellors can become demoralised when their ability to provide the service they believe is necessary is constrained due to limited or insufficient resources. Elliott and Schrink (2009) referred to the correctional environment as ‘the epitome of a bureaucracy’ and an organisation dominated by ‘rules and paperwork’, where standards and procedures take precedence over employees (p. 35). As Van Voorhis and Salisbury (2013) observed, administrative demands such as paperwork can significantly reduce opportunities for counselling.

In addition, counsellors are faced with ethical dilemmas at times, such as when obligated to report confidential information to authorities regarding prisoners (Gee, Loewenthal, & Cayne 2015; Huffman, 2006; Okun, 1997; Van Voorhis & Salisbury, 2013), a practice that conflicts with one of the main tenets of counselling practice: client confidentiality.

2.3 The Western Australian Prison System

The WA prison system has links with Australia’s colonial history and the transportation of prisoners to Botany Bay as part of the first fleet. Prisons in Britain had become overcrowded following the cessation of convict transportation to the United States and the Declaration of Independence (1776), and England needed a new land on which to banish her convicts. As such, Australia was significantly developed as a prison, ‘populated by both free and convict settlers’ (Roth, 2006, p. 19) with the first prisoners arriving at Botany Bay in 1788. The ‘treatment’ of prisoners was not a concern at this
stage as the proponents of transportation were focused on the utilisation of convicts as a labour resource in the settlement of new colonies (Steding, 1996).

Unlike many other states, WA was colonised as a free settlement (1829) rather than as a penal colony. It was not until 1850 that the first convicts arrived at the Swan River Colony directly from Britain in response to the continuing deterioration of the WA economy and the need for free labour in the developing colony (Steding, 1996; Thomas & Stewart, 1978). The influence of colonisation and the need for law and order in the new settlement soon became apparent, with initial measures to deal with local criminals involving containment on the hulk of a ship. Dissatisfaction with this approach resulted in the establishment of the first purpose-built prison in 1831, the Roundhouse in Fremantle (Thomas & Stewart, 1978). Although the construction of this facility suggests a somewhat more humane approach to dealing with offenders, punishment by public flogging and execution continued to be employed until 1870 as an example and deterrent to others.

Three other facilities for housing prisoners were operational in the early years of the colony: Perth Gaol (established in 1830), the Rottnest Island Establishment and Fremantle Prison (operations commenced in 1838 and 1855 respectively). Prisons continued to open, and some subsequently closed, throughout WA in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in accordance with the expansion and contraction of areas of the state (Thomas & Stewart, 1978), particularly during the gold rush era (1890–1929). It is noteworthy that the Rottnest Island Establishment was founded specifically to house Aboriginal offenders who were thereby out of sight of the broader community and their ‘alleged ill-treatment’ unseen (Thomas & Stewart, 1978, p. 145). The physical removal of these offenders to Rottnest Island marked the beginning of the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal people in WA prisons, which continues to this day (Thomas & Stewart, 1978). A brief chronology of WA prisons is provided in Appendix 1.

During the early years of the Swan River Colony, the imprisonment system was primarily intended as a form of punishment and as a means of establishing law and order. It was also required to follow practices and punishment approaches in accordance with the British legal system, which included the use of stocks, pillories, gallows and

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In 1919, of the 266.93 daily average prisoner population, 101.36 were Aborigines (Thomas & Stewart, 1978, 101).
public executions (Steding, 1996). The influence of European reformative ideals led to a gradual shift towards a more humane treatment of prisoners. According to Steding (1996), this reflected the ‘so-called moral management of prisoners’, which had been implemented in European prisons previously, and referred to systems based on reward and punishment for good and bad prisoner behaviour (p. 58). These worldwide changes in ideological thought were reflected in the WA prison system, with some changes, such as the open prison, considered unique to WA and an advance over practices in other Australian states and countries (Thomas & Stewart, 1978). Steding’s (1996) study of WA prisons categorised five changes in ideological thought and subsequent treatment of prisoners, which have been regrouped for the purposes of this study:

- 1830–1899: Period of reform and moral management
- 1899–1913: Period of reform

The current prison system in WA is the culmination of generations of understanding of the functions and objectives of prisons. As with all prison systems, multiple discourses, some competing and some conflicting, exist regarding managing criminality. These discourses manifest in a particular way in WA. Through its legislation and executive action, the WA government adopted an offender management system and philosophy, the fundamental objectives of which were documented as ‘security, safety, habilitation and rehabilitation, and reducing offending’ (Mahoney, 2005, pp. 35–36). This approach is now generally the preferred model in Australia, England, Canada, New Zealand and various parts of the United States (Mahoney, 2005). WA is often regarded as being at the forefront of the evolution of prison systems and its prisons as being of a good standard compared with prisons in many other countries (Allen, 2000; Mahoney, 2005).

2.3.1 The Department of Corrective Services

Similar to other Australian states and territories, correctional services are the responsibility of the state. As indicated previously, at the time data were collected for this research (2010/2011), the agency responsible for the management of offenders in WA, both in prisons and the community, was the Department of Corrective Services (DCS). It began operation in 2006 and was one of the state’s largest government departments (DCS, 2011).
The WA prison system is the single biggest correctional jurisdiction in the world (Johnson, 2011) and the size and population distribution necessarily affects both the need for and limitations of prisons. The Department manages 17 diverse prisons across the state for male and female adult offenders, from Derby in the north, Kalgoorlie to the east and Albany to the south (see Figure 2.1). The metro-centric nature of imprisonment results in a prison structure whereby most (74 per cent) adults incarcerated in WA are currently housed in nine metropolitan prisons and the remainder (26 per cent) in eight regional prisons (DCS, 2016a).

Figure 2.1: Western Australian Metropolitan and Regional Prison Locations (DCS, 2016)

Different manifestations of systemic requirements are determined by the specific prison setting, geographical location and the particular prisoner population, in terms of gender, security classification and whether a sentenced or remand prisoner.

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7 At the commencement of this study (2009), the Department owned 14 prisons across WA: seven metropolitan prisons (Acacia, Bandyup, Boronia Casuarina, Hakea, Karnet and Wooroloo) and seven regional prisons (Albany, Broome, Bunbury, Eastern Goldfields, Greenough, Pardelup and Roebourne). Since then, three other facilities have opened: two in November 2012 (West Kimberley Regional Prison in Derby and Wandoo Reintegration Facility in Perth metropolitan area [privately managed by Serco]), and one in December 2016 (Melaleuca Remand and Reintegration Facility for women in the Perth metropolitan area [privately managed by Sodexo]).

8 Melaleuca is not yet listed on the Department’s website map.
2.3.1.1. Prisoner Population

The WA adult prisoner population is predominantly male (90 per cent). Of that cohort, more than a third (38 per cent) are Aboriginal men (DCS, 2017). In fact, ABS figures (ABS, 2014) state that WA had the highest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment rate of all states and territories as at 30 June 2014.

Significantly, the WA prisoner population is characterised by people who are impoverished and/or marginalised (OICS, 2005). The causal relationship between crime and social conditions is well researched and social disadvantage in terms of disparities in income and employment identified as key factors in maintaining patterns of cyclical offending (Allen, 2000; OICS, 2005).

2.3.1.2. Department Responsibilities

The primary responsibilities of Corrective Services WA as currently documented are: ‘to ensure a safer community’ and the prison system entrusted to ‘secure and rehabilitate’ prisoners (DCS, 2013). These objectives accord with the Prisons Act 1981 (WA) but also reflect multiple discourses concerning crime and criminality. Neither ‘secure’ or ‘rehabilitate’ is defined on the DCS website or within the Prisons Act 1981 (WA) ‘Glossary of Terms’, with both, therefore, open to interpretation.

The Department has undergone numerous restructures, revisions and name changes dating back to the 1990s, although the broad organisational objectives have remained unchanged in terms of providing safety to the community and reducing reoffending. However, as stated in Chapter 1, history indicates that prisoner numbers in WA continue to rise steadily, with a substantial proportion of previously incarcerated people continuing to reoffend. For example, figures published by the ABS (2016a) indicate that the number of adult prisoners in WA prisons at 30 June 2016 had increased by 14 per cent from 2015, compared with one per cent in the general population, with three in five prisoners having been previously incarcerated. Although these figures could be interpreted as reflecting ‘success’ in terms of increased containment of prisoners, they could also be interpreted as reflecting the Department’s struggle to achieve its aims of successful prisoner rehabilitation and enhanced public safety.

Within each prison, two broad divisions, Adult Custodial Operations and Offender Services Division 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. Adult Custodial Operations is responsible for the daily regulation and management of prisoners, with uniformed custodial staff located within each prison including prison management (superintendent, deputy superintendent and assistant superintendents), supervisors of prison regimes and prison officers. Offender Services is responsible for the development and provision of programs and services that facilitate the rehabilitation of offenders and consist primarily of non-custodial staff. Senior management are located off site. Prison-based non-custodial staff include counselling and support staff, administrative, medical and education staff, programs facilitators and professional personnel who visit the prisons on a regular basis. The counselling and support sub-division is further divided into four subsections: the Prison Counselling Service, prison support officers, suicide prevention and the chaplain service (DCS, 2017b).

2.4 The Prison Counselling Service

2.4.1 Origins and Development

The origins of the WA Prison Counselling Service can be loosely traced to the late 1950s/early 1960s when a welfare worker and parole officer were reported to be working in Fremantle Prison and the Adult Probation and Welfare Service was introduced into WA prisons (Thomas & Stewart, 1978). During the 1960s, the Department of Corrections, as it was then named, also decided to increase the number of professional (non-custodial) staff in prisons to help prison administrators deal with the ‘inordinately difficult problems’ (Thomas & Stewart, 1978, p. 163) they were encountering. These problems were due to an increased prisoner population, allegations of assault and brutality towards prisoners, a death in custody and prisoner riots. Since then, prison counsellors have been part of what was previously referred to as the Special Needs Team (1980s–1990s) and the Forensic Case Management Team (1998–2002), a multidisciplinary team of allied health professionals with a shared responsibility for the welfare and wellbeing of prisoners across all WA prisons.

The impact of the legal, medical and economic discourses on Department decision-making, and subsequently on the Prison Counselling Service, is evident throughout the history of the service. For example, the influence of the medical model became increasingly apparent in the late 1960s, when a psychiatrist, social worker and four
psychologists were transferred to the prisons department as part of the forensic division of the mental health service. Although the specific role of the forensic division during this period is not clear, a focus on training and education of prison staff is documented (Thomas & Stewart, 1978). As reflected in the excerpt below from the *WA Prisons Act 1981* (Part IX—Prisoner wellbeing and rehabilitation, Section 95 [2] [e]), an increasing need for the provision of counselling services to prisoners was also evident around this time and suggestive of an increased focus on prisoner welfare.

> In particular, services and programmes may be designed and instituted with the intention of—(e) providing counselling services and other assistance to prisoners and their families in relation to personal and social matters and problems. (p. 83)

In the late 1990s, a sudden increase in the number of deaths in custody (Allen, 2000, p. 4) resulted in the Special Needs Team amalgamating with Prison Health Services and a subsequent name change to the Forensic Case Management Team (FCMT) in 1998. Most team members were located in the metropolitan prisons (OICS, 2006). In the same year, a system designed to manage and monitor prisoners with suicidal ideation or intent was implemented across all WA prisons: the At Risk Management System (ARMS). As a system formalised in policy, the ARMS was intended to provide staff with clear procedures for the accurate and timely identification of vulnerable prisoners. The model was conceived as a shared responsibility between all prison staff (custodial and non-custodial), rather than as a problem solely for the providers of health and other support services (Allen, 2000, p. 6). This strategy accords with international practice in the sense that the increase in prison populations all over the world has been suggested as driving the development of risk assessment methods to deal with increasing prisoner numbers and as a way of rationalising scarce resources (Trotter, 2009).

Despite the introduction of the FCMT and ARMS initiatives, the Suicide Prevention Taskforce (SPT) was commissioned in 2000 to address the continued increase in WA prisoner suicide rates and develop more effective strategies and solutions (SPT, 2002). One of the criticisms of the suicide prevention mechanism in place at that time (SPT, 2002) was that the personnel responsible for managing ‘at-risk’ prisoners (FCMT, mental health staff and prison officers) were perceived as interpreting and responding to

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9 Between January 1995 and 30 June 2000, there were 56 deaths from all causes, which represented 56 per cent of total deaths in WA prisons in the 18 years between 1982 and 30 June 2000 (100) and exceeds the number of deaths in the previous 13.5 years combined (Allen, 2000, p. 4).
vulnerable prisoners differently, with ‘individual ideas as to what constitutes suicidal behaviour’ (p. 66). This suggests that there were no clear practice guidelines in place for staff and is concerning given that deaths in custody due to suicide are an ongoing problem. Towl and Forbes stated that ‘working with the suicidal in forensic environment is one of the most challenging roles for staff’ (Towl & Forbes, 2002; Towl, 2006).

Management of the FCMT was subsequently transferred from Prison Health Services to the Offender Services and Sentence Management directorate in 2002, and the FCMT’s name changed to the Prison Counselling Service (OICS, 2006). This name change formed part of ‘a new strategy targeted towards preventing suicide and self-harm in the custodial environment’ (Offender Services, 2012, p. 7), a strategy which proposed a common model, with a common purpose and language, and with resource allocation to include dedicated staff responsible for the development of this model (SPT, 2002, p. 66). The adequacy of the budget allocation to implement this new strategy was, however, questioned in a subsequent report by the Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS, 2006). To complement the ARMS, an additional service, the Support and Monitoring System (SAMS), was established in March 2010 to provide a collaborative case management service for prisoners who, although not at risk to themselves, were identified as vulnerable and requiring additional support in the prison environment (DCS, 2009a).

2.4.2 Current Structure and Role

The WA Prison Counselling Service is configured in several ways in accordance with systemic requirements. A service is based in all prisons except Pardelup prison farm\(^\text{10}\) and consists of a sole practitioner or a team of prison counsellors (two or more) according to prison location. Prisons that house large numbers of prisoners (maximum- and medium-security prisons) mostly employ a team of counsellors, whereas all minimum-security prisons and prisons with a smaller prisoner population (e.g., less than 200) generally engage one counsellor only.

\(^{10}\) A regular service is not available at Pardelup prison farm, although the department has an arrangement whereby a counsellor from either Albany or Bunbury regional prisons attends Pardelup prison once every three months (OICS, 2012b).
The counsellors’ role can vary widely between settings and may extend beyond counselling per se. Although the actual prison counsellor role is uniformly defined across prisons, it is operationalised differently from prison to prison in terms of work focus. Staff based at regional prisons and one metropolitan prison are employed in a combined role with duties including individual counselling, treatment assessments to determine prisoners’ program treatment needs, and/or facilitation of group treatment programs to address offending behaviour-related issues, such as violence, substance misuse and sexual offending. Staff working at other metropolitan prisons are employed exclusively as prison counsellors. There are structural variations that impact on counsellors’ respective role responsibilities:

- setting and geographical location, whether metropolitan or regional prison based
- mandate, whether employed in a combined role—counselling, treatment assessments and/or programs—or exclusively in a counselling role
- team, whether working with a group of colleagues or working alone
- prisoner population, whether working with sentenced and/or remand male and/or female prisoners and/or predominantly Aboriginal prisoners
- prison security classification, whether a maximum-, medium- or minimum-security facility.

The DCS prison counsellor position requires that staff hold a four-year tertiary qualification in either social work or psychology. The work-related requirements of the role are documented broadly as communication and interpersonal skills, therapeutic assessment and intervention skills, knowledge and experience of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and experience in a counselling role (DCS, 2014). Counselling interventions are also required to accord with the standards set out by the International Association for Correctional and Forensic Psychology Practice Standards Committee (2010).11

Counsellors are employed primarily to treat prisoners suffering acute and severe psycho-social problems related to their incarceration and who are at potential risk of self-harm or suicide. In line with the focus of suicide prevention, the description of the

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11 Standards for Psychology Services in Services in Jails, Prisons, Correctional Facilities, and Agencies.
Prison Counselling Service on the ‘Rehabilitation and services: Counselling and support’ page of the DCS public website is documented as:

**Prison Counselling Service**

The Prison Counselling Service provides individual counselling sessions for prisoners who are having trouble coping in prison. It is made up of psychologists and social workers and assesses prisoners to see if they have any self-harm, suicide or other risk factors. If a prisoner is found to have any of these issues, the Service provides crisis counselling and other help. (DCS, 2017c)

A greater emphasis on the rehabilitative role of counsellors is provided in the description on the ‘Careers (opportunities)’ page:

**Prison Counselling Service**

You’re here to put your specialist professional skills to the test by helping offenders adjust to the day to day life of imprisonment. Your goal will be rehabilitating them so they may reintegrate into society. From crisis counselling and assessments/interventions, to supporting less experienced team members and keeping an eye out for signs of suicidal or self-harming behaviour, you’ll do everything you can to enhance rehabilitative outcomes. (DCS, 2009b)

Specific practice guidelines on how counsellors should address these issues (prisoner adjustment, suicide/self-harm, rehabilitation and reintegration) are not explicit other than a reference to the application of ‘discipline specific professional knowledge, experience, skills and techniques’ (DCS, 2014).

### 2.5 Embodied Perspective of Counsellors

From reviewing the existing literature on prisons and correctional counselling, it was apparent that the voice and perspective of the frontline practitioner was mostly missing. Although there is a substantial body of work that describes the people involved in correctional counselling, psychology and psychotherapy in prisons (Elliott & Schrink, 2009; Harvey & Smedley, 2010; Polizzi et al., 2014; Sun, 2013), the focus is often on the client and practice outcomes, rather than the embodied understanding and perspective of people seeking to make sense of their work in a prison. Therefore, an exploration of how prison counsellors perceive their work is important to ensure that ‘effective’ practice can be identified and advanced accordingly.
Criminal justice agencies are identified by Williams (1996) as complex bureaucracies. He argued that it is important for workers to be clear about their professional and personal values and identity when working with or within these organisations. A worker’s capacity to manage their anxieties and to have a sense of ‘who and what [they] are’ as a helping professional within the organisation is identified as critical for practice efficacy (Harrison & Ruch, 2007, p. 46), such as in a prison context. A worker’s ‘self-conceptualization’ (Adams, Hean, Sturgis, & Macleod-Clark, 2006, p. 56) in their professional role is arguably the starting point from which a practitioner begins a series of relationships within their work environment. A worker must be able to juggle the often-conflicting professional demands of working in a prison system, including organisationally driven procedures that focus on the security and control of prisoners, while providing a private, supportive space in which prisoners can communicate their concerns. This challenge is arguably accentuated when working with prisoners, many of whom, as previously stated, may view counsellors with disregard or suspicion.

According to Ruch et al. (2010), practitioners’ ability to retain a sense of connectedness to themselves and their professional identity will be largely determined by the qualities they bring to the role. Several authors referred to the notion of the self as ‘a resource’ (e.g., Flaskas et al., 2007, p. 32) and ‘the primary tool of practice’ (Ward, 2010, p. 52), and a notion that would necessarily encompass qualities such as philosophical resolve, resilience, sense of self-efficacy and an ability to remain calm (Ward, 2010). Further Mazza (2008) claimed that a worker’s ‘conscious use of self’ (p. 261) is imperative when working in a prison and argued that workers would not survive in a prison environment without it. As has been discussed, prison counsellors are faced with numerous challenges, many of which extend beyond those of clinicians working in the general community. Therefore, the need to possess qualities such as those identified above would seem particularly critical to their being able to maintain a sense of personal and professional identity. In view of the issues and considerations outlined in this chapter, this research aims to explore in depth the perceptions and experiences of counsellors working in the WA prison system.

2.6 Summary Comments

This chapter has provided a context for the research by highlighting some of the factors, past and present, that are relevant to a study of prison counselling in WA, drawing on existing literature.
From a historical perspective, the literature indicates that several recurring themes have emerged over the past 200 years regarding both the need for and conflict around the role of prisons in society. Although there have been periodic shifts in public sentiment regarding more humane or punitive treatment of prisoners in line with prevailing discourses about the treatment of offenders, a ‘tough on crime’ approach has tended to dominate. A combination of legal, medical and economic discourses continues to influence current debates regarding the treatment of prisoners, with criminals ‘typically’ defined as a danger to people and property, or pathologised as sick and in need of cure and rehabilitation. In WA, the impact of colonisation has resulted in a prison system that is influenced by several competing discourses. The current system seeks to provide community safety and secure and rehabilitate prisoners, although history indicates that imprisonment as a deterrent against future offending has generally been ineffective.

Conflicting views regarding ‘what works’ in terms of rehabilitating prisoners has resulted in the frequent reappraisal of treatment-oriented penology, which affects people in remedial roles. The literature indicates that correctional counselling in a prison is a more complex activity than counselling clients in the community, compounded by the fact that the client group is involuntary and the prison setting unconducive to therapeutic practice. In the absence of consistent evidence regarding effective counselling approaches when working with prisoners, and the potential discord between practitioner and organisational expectations of the role and intervention outcomes, counsellors may struggle to sustain a positive outlook.

The correctional literature identifies the prison system as a complex bureaucracy, with workers needing to be clear about their professional and personal values when working within this system. Reference to the ‘here and now’ lived experience of the practitioner, as described by practitioners, is mostly absent from the literature. Therefore, this is the topic this study seeks to explore.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the philosophical underpinnings and theoretical perspectives that informed the study and research approach, the tools and procedures used to collect the data, and the theory and ethical considerations that guided the analytical decisions. In describing these processes, the theoretical model used to shape and manage the research findings is discussed and the use of this model as a template by which to structure and present the chapters. I locate myself as an insider-researcher and address the practicalities and measures taken to mitigate the challenges associated with the ‘dual’ insider/outsider role.

3.1 Research Objective and Focus

The focus of this research was lived experience, and the goal to provide rich, detailed descriptions of stories from the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; McLeod, 2011), with the view to understanding how these stories are representative of the lived experience of prison counsellors and what can be generalised from that information. A qualitative approach was selected as the most suited to the research objective, as it enables an in-depth exploration of people’s experiences. As stated in the introduction to this thesis, the study was based on the premise that the voice and experience of the frontline practitioner working in a counselling role in a prison setting is mostly absent from the literature and needs to be heard. To address this issue, and help to reduce this perceived gap, the research question was:

- How do practitioners describe and make sense of their lived experience of working in a prison setting?

The phrase ‘make sense of’ refers to people’s individual understanding of the work that they do in a regulatory setting rather than claiming to be statements of truth in the positivist/absolute sense. This is an exploratory, descriptive study of the ‘life-world’ (Schwandt, 2001, p. 191) of prison counsellors, of how they find meaning, purpose and fulfilment in their work and retain a sense of professional identity and congruence with their core values.
3.2 Philosophical Underpinnings and Theoretical Perspectives Informing the Study

In view of the research focus, the overriding framework to the study was existentialism, a philosophy of lived experience. The ultimate purpose of the research was to interpret practitioner experience. Thus, the affiliated framework chosen was interpretivist. The specific interpretivist framework adopted was one of located ‘beingness’ and is a frame that accords with both constructivism and social constructionism. A particular example of the ontological perspective that brings together existentialism and locatedness is provided by Thompson (1998, 2012) in his Personal Cultural Structural (PCS) theoretical model, which was used as a basis for structuring and managing the findings.

3.2.1 Existentialism

Existentialism is concerned with ontology, the science of being and with the complex process of human existence. It acknowledges existence as not only occurring within the individual but ‘between individuals and their world’ (Prochaska, 1979, p. 70). As a ‘unifying philosophical framework’, it enables ideas and insights from other, often competing, viewpoints to be incorporated when examining human experience (Thompson, 2010). In addition, it is the understanding of human beings as unique, dynamic entities who are always emerging and becoming, as existing, rather than as static mechanistic subjects or controllable objects. From an existentialist perspective, each individual has the freedom to choose his or her own authentic experience while the responsibility for that choice remains with the individual (Thompson, 2011).

Existentialism emphasises perception, interpretation and meaning as the basis of ‘our’ reality while acknowledging the constant interplay between the individual and wider sociopolitical factors. As a mode of theorising, it provides a basis from which practitioner lived experience can be analysed and thus, help to build an overall picture of what it means to ‘be’ a prison counsellor. A capacity ‘to be’ arguably acquires an added significance when working in a complex prison environment with individuals, many of whom are unpredictable and have committed violent crimes.

3.2.2 Interpretivism

An interpretive paradigmatic approach assumes that social reality is subjective, consisting of ‘stories or meanings produced or constructed by individuals within their natural settings’ (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 77). The interpretivist framework
incorporates two closely related perspectives: constructivism and constructionism. Both perspectives highlight the centrality of language and the words available for making sense: the former emphasising the unique and the latter the located aspects of ‘knowing and being’ in the world. This study utilises a combined approach to these notions, whereby the ‘uniqueness’ and the ‘locatedness’ of the practitioner is considered.

‘Constructivism’ is based on the philosophical assumption that reality does not exist in any ultimate, empirical way. Rather, it is a construction of the person who is viewing or experiencing reality at any given moment (Klugman, 1997). Nothing simply ‘is’ but rather all things are mediated or constructed or mitigated by contexts within contexts, ad infinitum (Klugman, 1997). Constructivism describes the individual human subject as engaging with objects in the world and thus, making sense of them.

Foundational to a ‘constructionist’ perspective is the assumption that humans are taught meaning from the cultures and subcultures into which they are born (Crotty, 2003). A constructionist approach emphasises language and authorship, and provides a vocabulary for understanding and using the substance of process. Parton and O’Byrne (2000) described this perspective as an approach that ‘focuses on dialogue, listening to and talking with the other’ (p. 186) and emphasised the importance of language ‘for constructing the experiences and identity of both the self and the interaction’ (p. 187) and of power in relation to the interplay of competing discourses and constructions.

The conceptual ‘holding together’ (Peile, 1994, p. 27) of ‘constructivist’ and ‘constructionist’ approaches proposed in this study enables the synthesising of subjective knowledge and experience with external forces to be examined. More specifically, it examines the iterative relationship between counsellors’ individual perceptions and located understanding of their experience of working in a prison system. Drawing from the work of Peile (1994), each approach is conceptualised as the shadow of the other and intrinsically reliant upon the other; delineated as such by the title of this thesis, ‘the person-in-environment-perspective’. The concept of prison counsellors as embodied beings, inseparable from the whole of the prison system, further aligns with Thompson’s (2010) notion of embedment in that ‘none of us exists in a social vacuum’ (p. 59).
3.2.3 Conceptual Framework

As a theoretical framework embedded within an existentialist ontology, Thompson’s (1998, 2012) Personal Cultural Structural (PCS) conceptualisation facilitates the exploration of ‘beingness’ in the world while acknowledging ‘the complexities of human existence and the existentialist challenges [people] face’ (Thompson, 2010, p. 256). According to this model, the Structural level refers to the way in which society is organised—the social divisions and network of hierarchies and the power relations that maintain social order in terms of social, political and economic factors. The Cultural level represents ‘shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing’ (Thompson, 2012, p. 33) and reflects the influence of society on people’s values, beliefs and interests. It refers to taken-for-granted assumptions, habits and unwritten rules that become normalised as accepted patterns of behaviour.

The Personal level focuses on the person, their individual thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and their personal beliefs and values about the world. It also refers to professional practice in terms of what each person brings to the workplace, their approach and their interactions with clients and colleagues and, broadly speaking, the elements that constitute a person’s identity. A person’s identity is conceptualised as a non-static, fluid phenomenon, capable of change. It is shaped by the temporal influences that surround him or her.

Thompson (2012) conceptualised this model in the context of inequality and oppression in the human services to highlight ‘the inadequacy of explanations which stop short at the individual level’ (p. 36). In this research, the model (see Figure 3.1) is used to provide a wider perspective that highlights the complex nature of prison work. Thus, it enables a broader understanding of the psychological and sociopolitical factors that affect the practice and identity of a prison counsellor.
Figure 3.1: Thompson’s Conceptual Framework

The three levels of this framework are conceptualised by Thompson as interrelated rather than separate domains, with each level embedded within and dependent upon the other. Thus, the Personal level influences the Cultural level, the Cultural level influences the Structural level, and the Structural level influences the Personal level (Thompson, 2013). In exploring the iterative relationship between these three levels, the person, their community and the society within which they are situated, the framework alerts us to a wider context through which practitioner experience can be interpreted. Further, it acknowledges the ‘beingness’ at the core of human experience.

While identifying the uniqueness of the individual, Thompson’s framework also explores the interpersonal level and the nature of dialogical engagement that he argued is at the heart of professional interactions. Although these interactions are embedded for each party, the significance of the interaction is both culturally and structurally located, with each affecting the other.

3.2.4 Phenomenological Perspective

A further perspective informing this research is phenomenology, the study of perception. Drawing from a style of philosophising that focuses on ‘conscious subjective experience’ (Gray & Zide, 2006, p. 59), the phenomenological approach emphasises experiential evidence and ‘concrete lived experience in all its richness’ (Moran, 2000, p. 3). According to Moran, phenomenology attempts to describe rather than explain and thereby seeks clarification as to “what it is like to have the experience” (p. 15). A phenomenological approach is a means, therefore, by which the experience of prison counselling from the perspective of the practitioner can be understood. The person who has direct knowledge of this phenomenon and is considered best able to provide a comprehensive description of it.
A phenomenological approach requires an individual to bracket their preconceived understandings of phenomena in the world (the objects of experience) to recover a fresh perception of existence. In this study, this endeavour is complicated by my ‘dual’ role as an insider-researcher: a social worker employed within the Offender Services subdivision of the WA prison service.

3.2.4.1. ‘Insider’ Research—A Contested Domain

Practitioners-as-researchers are identified by Shaw (2005) as not a new idea. He also claimed that the desirability of practitioner research is rarely questioned. The issue of whether practitioner research has a place as a distinct genre of research remains contested in social sciences literature. The conventional view of sound research methodology cautions against ‘the distorting influence of [the researcher’s] subjectivity and emotional responses’ (Cooper, 2009, p. 438). However, some studies commend practitioner research for its subtlety and critical potential with the opportunity to turn ‘the ethnographic gaze upon the familiar’ (White, 2001, p. 104) to provide a fresh perspective on practices and issues. By contrast, some authors pointed out that insider/practitioner research may potentially be individualistic and limited (McLeod, 2011; Shaw, 2005) in the sense that clinician-researchers ‘rarely find anything other than what they had commonsensically anticipated at the start of their enquiry’ (White, 2001, p. 105).

As previously stated, a phenomenological perspective requires that explanations are not imposed by the researcher before the phenomena of interest have been understood from within (Moran, 2000, p. 4). As an insider-researcher, my interactions with people were inevitably influenced by the fact that I share the same professional space as the research participants and I am impacted by the prison culture and structure in the same way, a phenomenon to which Peile (1988) alluded when stating, ‘the researcher is not separate from the object of research, [as each are] enfolded in the other’ (p. 13). The major challenge of working as an ‘insider’ within a phenomenological perspective was trying to suspend my preconceived assumptions and identifying my taken-for-granted notions about prison work with the knowledge that my position was always located. To address this challenge, I sought to avoid all potential misconstructions and impositions drawn from my own cultural background and experience, and which I may have inadvertently placed on practitioner experience in advance.
3.3 Method

3.3.1 Negotiating Ethics Approval

To undertake the research, ethics approval was sought and granted from the University of Western Australia’s Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the study. In light of this permission, the Department of Corrective Services’ Research and Evaluation Committee approved the study. Issues of participant privacy and confidentiality were addressed through a thorough informed consent process and adherence to sound ethical research guidelines. Participants were advised in the introductory letter (see Appendix 2) that their anonymity would be maintained throughout the research. The letter stated that all recorded materials (discs/tapes) and transcripts would be stored in a secure location in my personal research setting at the university and would be destroyed seven years after the completion of the thesis.

3.3.2 Target Group and Recruitment

Prison counselling services’ staff from all WA metropolitan and regional adult prisons were contacted by letter, outlining the details of the study and inviting them to participate. Of the 50 prison counselling employees at the time of the study, 36 agreed to contribute: 24 metropolitan-prison based staff and 12 regional-based staff. When people did not respond immediately, several attempts were made to contact them. Five specifically declined, three others agreed but for reasons of employment changes and relocation were ultimately unable to participate. Six people failed to respond after several attempts were made and no further effort was made to contact them.

The 36 staff who agreed to participate can be regarded as generally representative of the total population of all prisons, given the high proportion of counsellors involved and the fact that several participants had worked in multiple prisons, both metropolitan and regional. This enabled access to a diverse range of perspectives necessary to examine the prison counselling role and allow for the identification of region-specific viewpoints.

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12 Acacia, Albany, Bandyup, Boronia, Broome, Bunbury, Casuarina, Eastern Goldfields, Greenough, Hakea, Karnet, Roebourne and Wooroloo Prisons. As stated in Chapter 2, two new facilities opened in 2012 (West Kimberley Regional Prison [Derby] and Wandoor Reintegration Facility) and Melaleuca Remand & Reintegration Facility in 2016.
The participants included 14 social workers (11 females and three males) and 22 psychologists (13 females and nine males) from a range of nationalities, ages and levels of experience. Notably, the gender balance in both cases is representative of the professional profile more broadly—women tend to be the norm in both professions. Length of service in the prison counsellor role ranged between two weeks and 11 years, while participants were aged between late 20s to 60-plus years. Of the 36 participants, 29 had never worked as a counsellor or therapist before joining the Prison Counselling Service. Four respondents held higher-level supervisory roles within prison counselling teams.

Staff (17) based at six of the seven metropolitan prisons were employed solely as prison counsellors, while staff (19) based at all regional prisons, and the seventh metropolitan prison, were employed in a combined role—that is, counselling, assessments and/or programs. Metropolitan-based staff worked solely with male (20 participants) or female prisoners (three participants). Southern regional-based staff worked exclusively with male prisoners. Participants in northern regional prisons worked with male and female offenders, who were primarily Aboriginal and from a diverse range of tribal groups.

3.3.3 Data Collection

In line with qualitative research and an interpretivist/constructionist framework, the data collection method was in-depth interviews, loosely structured around broad themes to elicit responses from participants and draw out rich descriptions of ‘lived experience’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 4). The interview guide is presented in Appendix 3.

3.3.3.1. Interview Process

Participants were contacted via their work email address to arrange a convenient time and place to meet. Of the 36 participants, 22 were interviewed at prison locations, while the remaining 14 were interviewed at other suitable, agreed-upon locations. Several practical issues constrained the interview process from the outset, such as prison lockdown periods that impeded the opportunities for meeting with the counsellors. In addition, the use of a recording device within prison grounds was prohibited. Therefore, administration facilities adjacent to the prison grounds were used for the ‘on-site’ interviews.
The interviews were conducted over 12 months, between August 2010 and July 2011. The order in which staff were interviewed was based on logistical considerations, given the geographical location of the various prisons. Interviews were recorded using an audio digital device and ranged in duration from one and a half to three hours. The scope of the interview broadened as the data collection phase progressed to allow for exploration of new issues raised by participants and as my understandings developed. Participants were encouraged to reflect more deeply on these issues and in this sense, the researcher and the researched became co-creators of a narrative that was both descriptive and interpretative (Riessman, 2008).

All interviews were transcribed and returned to participants for checking to ensure anonymity and allow for any additions or deletions. This process fostered collaborative work with practitioners, which Riessman (2008) noted is a very different exercise from asking participants to check the researcher’s ‘interpretive conclusions’ (p. 197). Two participants requested that certain details of their interview be deleted from the final thesis. Three participants provided unprompted feedback as to how the research process had affected them in a positive way, a factor identified by several authors as evidence for the authenticity or catalytic validity of the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; McLeod, 2011; Stiles, 1993).

In accordance with the research agreement outlined in the introductory letter, participants were emailed a second time to gauge their responses to Department structural changes that had transpired since the initial interviews and had affected the Prison Counselling Service. However, data from the second round were not used because of further structural changes and the questionable relevance of the feedback to the research.

3.3.4 Data Management and Analysis

A hermeneutic process was applied in relation to the data analysis. It was an ongoing iterative process between the extant literature and the themes that emerged from conversations with practitioners, and from my own reflections on the dialogues and texts. As a theory of interpretation, hermeneutics has been described as an ongoing cycle of understanding (Moran, 2000). Phenomena encountered in the world are critically examined anew, with the intention of coming to a deeper comprehension of them. It assumes that the interpreter knows to some degree the phenomena he or she
seeks to understand (Reason & Rowan, 1981). In this respect, it is reflective of my position as an insider-researcher.

According to McLeod (2011), a hermeneutic approach seeks to construct a historical understanding of the experience and realities of other people. Thus, it accords with the overall aim of this research: to provide a ‘thick’ description (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Plack, 2005) of what it means ‘to be’ a prison counsellor within the current ‘cultural-historical context’ (McLeod, 2011, p. 28), and from which understanding can be gained. As a researcher interpreting practitioners’ words, hermeneutics provided a template from which the verbal texts (interviews) offered by practitioners could be constantly reviewed and re-framed and new meanings identified.

3.3.4.1. Thompson’s Model as an Organising Framework

The model used to shape the research findings is based on Thompson’s PCS analysis and the concept of embedment. The model enables ideas and insights from different theoretical sources to be linked within the data analysis process, and provides a conceptual tool by which the dynamics of prison counselling within the WA prison system may be represented. On a practical level, the model was a way of organising and presenting the data and maintaining focus, particularly as the account became more complex.

Some adaptations were made to this model so that it aligned more closely with the focus of the study. The Structural level was adapted to refer to the prison system and, specifically, to workers’ understanding of:

- the interlocking patterns of power and influence within it
- counsellors’ place within it structurally
- how that placement impacted on them as prison counsellors.

The Structural dimension has also been interpreted broadly to include aspects of the physical environment within which prison counsellors and the Prison Counselling Service are embedded. Similarly, the Cultural domain was interpreted as denoting the individual prison setting or subsystem in which prison counsellors were located, and how that setting and the nexus of relationships therein shaped their perceptions, experience and understandings of the system overall. It was also interpreted as relating
to prison counsellors’ practice—how their responsibilities were structured and defined in relation to other people’s responsibilities within the physical and cultural space.

The Personal level in Thompson’s model focuses on the individual in terms of their thoughts, feelings, behaviour, beliefs and values about the world, and their professional practice and identity. Although prison counsellors are embedded within the cultural and structural levels of the prison system, these formations ‘do not determine who or what the individual is’ (Thompson, 2010, p. 66).

In this study, a distinction was intentionally made regarding Thompson’s Personal level when describing the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels of relationship. The interpersonal level refers to prison counsellors’ professional relationships with prisoners, whereas the intrapersonal domain denotes the more intimate space of the participants themselves: their individual characteristics and sense of ‘self’ within this role and context. These two levels (inter and intra) are identified as interrelated and interdependent, in constant movement and interplay while embedded within the cultural and structural domains. Each part informs the other by varying degrees and each domain provides a different perspective from which to observe the other(s). Although the focus (in a prison setting) may be how the environment affects practitioners (and prisoners), or how (practitioners) affect their environment, these processes are identified as ‘continuous and inescapable’ (Peile, 1998, p. 49).

The research findings are presented in accordance with Thompson’s model in Chapters 4–7. One specific level (personal, cultural, structural) is foregrounded in each chapter, while emphasising the interrelatedness between each level.

3.3.4.2. Stages of the Analysis

The first stage of the analysis was to record my immediate impressions after each interview as a verbal text, to create a working interpretive document that included my first attempts to make sense of what was learnt through practitioners’ descriptions. My first interpretations, although highly impressionistic, were important for the initial shaping of the data and for informing my subsequent analysis. This process accords with the extant literature on qualitative research, in that preliminary reflection is considered important for sensitising the researcher to the phenomenon of interest and his or her ‘preliminary ideas around it’ (Priest, 2002, p. 56).
Data were entered in NVivo8 for coding. Thematic analysis was conducted by categorising recurring ideas within the transcript data to identify key findings. The initial coding tended to be surface representations of my sense making, preoccupied with content and description rather than analytic rigour. I encountered several technical problems with NVivo8 during the stages of analysis and settled on a combination of electronic and manual methods instead.

A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was developed to organise the themes and subthemes and to enable closer examination of patterns between participant descriptions. I assigned headings in accordance with key attributes, such as prison location (metropolitan/regional) and prisoner population (male/female), and started to shape the data informed by the research prompts and overall research question. Specific areas for exploration included:

- the factors that brought people into the prison counselling role
- their sense of connection (or not) with the prison system
- issues within the prison setting that facilitated or impeded counselling practice
- the counsellor–prisoner relationship, and counsellors’ coping strategies in terms of sustaining a sense of connectivity to the ‘self’ in this role and context.

The categories were refined in accordance with Thompson’s PCS model to enable a three-dimensional exploration of people’s identity and to structure the findings into an overall coherent picture of what it means to be a prison counsellor in the WA prison system within the current historical context.

In keeping with qualitative research practices and the hermeneutic process, I endeavoured to deconstruct, reconstruct and synthesise the data in a continuing cycle of exploration, analysis, insight and further exploration, to articulate and make new sense of practitioner experiences of working in a prison system. This process was further driven by an ‘intuitive feel’ (McLeod, 2011, p. 181) and my insider knowledge for what might inform the research question, rather than sole reliance on predetermined analytic rules.

Data were translated into themes that were further refined until all instances of contradictions, similarities and differences were explained. This supported
‘trustworthiness’ (Riessman, 2008, p. 191) and increased the dependability and consistency of the findings. Additionally, it included searching the data for specific examples in which individuals’ accounts converged thematically and unique cases and instances in which they diverged. Through finding some commonalities, I hoped to make a meta-sense of located perceptions without dishonouring the uniqueness of each prison counsellor’s experience. Similarly, by analysing participants’ varying or incongruent descriptions or responses (e.g., moments of spontaneous laughter when a participant was describing a distressing experience), structures and relations of meaning not immediately apparent were identified. In identifying the emerging trends and unique cases in the data, a thick multilayered, multidimensional description of the many forces impacting on workers’ perceptions of self, role and relationships within the prison system was sought.

3.3.4.3. Ethical Considerations

The question of ownership and whether the original authors of interview data should have their say in the interpretation and communication of their stories is identified as contentious in the literature (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 218). Participants may not agree with the researcher’s conclusions, and issues that were pertinent at the time of the interview may no longer be relevant (O’Leary, 2004; Riessman, 2008). In this study, the issue of ethical responsibility and the right and attribution of meaning to the information staff provided rested solely with me. I had not specifically contracted for participants to check the final conclusions prior to submission of the thesis.

3.4 Locating the Self

Denzin and Lincoln (2013) pointed out that the biographically situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas and beliefs about existence that subsequently shape how he or she sees the world and acts in it. As an insider-researcher, many aspects of the way I approached the study and any inferences or interpretations offered are acknowledged as being produced within the context and tradition in which I work, and influenced by my personal beliefs, values and experience. My ‘insider’ status was a distinct advantage in many ways. Importantly, it provided me with an opportunity to critically examine my workplace, and as Peile (1988) described, a chance to ‘[look] in through oneself to the whole’ (p. 13).
On a practical level, being a Departmental employee I was familiar with the processes involved in contacting staff working in the prison counsellor role and for entering prisons, subject to the normal procedures for staff undertaking approved research. Access to prisons, it is claimed, is generally difficult for outsiders to negotiate and achieve (Dilulio, 1987, as cited in Slate, Vogel, & Johnson, 2001, p. 74). However, as outlined below, being an insider also presented me with unforeseen challenges during the data collection and analysis stages.

During the data collection stage, participants raised issues related to their role responsibilities, which I failed to explore in greater depth as I mistakenly assumed I had a good understanding of that responsibility. For example, I did not always explore the meaning practitioners ascribed to the At Risk Management System and how it impacted on them. It was not until one participant raised the issue of coronial enquiries and deaths in custody that I realised my oversight. Further, I had to work on my own discomfort on other occasions when asking practitioners certain questions or to explain obvious ‘experience-near concepts’ (White, 2001, p. 104) regarding the prison system, the answers to which I already knew. This finding aligns with Crotty’s (2003) identification of the ‘tyranny of the familiar’ (p. 59) as an inherent risk in practice-near research.

My early perceptions of some people whose practice and definitions were different from my own created a further challenge. I struggled at times to put my views to one side, to be the curious observer rather than the biased judge of behaviour. This sometimes inclined me towards asking certain questions and drawing particular conclusions (Wolcott, 2009). The issue of viewing judgementally and commenting on how work does get done rather than how it should be done is identified in the literature however as needing documentation. Thus, an insider is in a prime position to act as catalyst for that exchange, to enable a basis for ‘fruitful dialogue between research and practice’ (White, 2001, p. 114).

I was also conscious of some people’s reservations in describing their anxieties and negative experiences of working in a prison system. I perceived this reticence as fear ‘of showing themselves as vulnerable’ (Simmonds, 2010, p. 219) and/or as appearing ‘unprofessional’ (Morrison, 1997, p. 18). Additionally, it could be related to the issue of complex power relationships between researcher and participant in the context of ‘in-depth’ interviewing (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995). Another possible contributing factor was that most prison counsellors had greater practitioner
experience than I did, and some had mentored me during my field placement as a student social worker.

The issue of impartiality arose again during the data analysis stage and when first reading the interview transcripts. I was unable to discern anything in the material that was different from what I, as an insider, already knew; I did not have any ‘scent’ (Bazeley, 2009, p. 21) for hidden or deeper meanings. As the analysis continued, and in accordance with the hermeneutic process and cycle, I realised that the conversations I had with practitioners had impacted on my practice and work with prisoners on many levels and in ways I could not have anticipated. In trying to make sense of the data, I had inadvertently been exposed to a body of practice wisdom and clinical skills that I subsequently attempted to incorporate into my group work with prisoners. On reflection, I realised I had metaphorically ‘absorbed’ this information and mistakenly assumed the knowledge originated in me. This was a significant shift from my initial contention that there was nothing unfamiliar in the transcripts. One negative aspect of this newly found knowledge, however, was that I was often preoccupied with thinking about my work with my clients rather than the research participants. To retain critical distance and immerse myself in the research material, I decided to remove myself from the work environment for an extended period to become an ‘outsider-insider’ and complete the thesis.

To remain open to the immediacy of the information gathered and enable fuller and renewed meanings to emerge, I regularly discussed the research with my supervisor. Additionally, I further scrutinised the transcripts to ensure that potentially hidden or deeper meanings within the data were not overlooked. This strategy corresponds with the recommendation of McLeod (2011), who pointed out the importance of dialogue between a researcher and supervisor during the data collection and analysis stage to enable consideration of ‘alternative viewpoints’ (p. 276). Throughout the period of the tenure I also regularly presented sections of the findings to fellow PhD students and staff at the University of Western Australia for discussion and critique.

Overall, and despite the challenges involved, my insider status provided me with the opportunity to examine the practice of ‘counselling’ in the unique context of a prison environment and of what that endeavour entails.
3.5 Parameters of the Research

This was a small-scale, exploratory descriptive study of practitioners’ perceptions of working in a prison system. It was an experiential representation of the contextualised possibilities and challenges of engaging in therapeutic exchange in a regulatory setting. Potentially, this research has relevance and applicability to other statutory settings. The study tells a story and draws inferences, while making no claims to truth statements. There are no limitations in the validity of the research. It is hoped that it will provide insights into how practitioners are equipped to best fit the needs of prisoners and those of the broader society.

3.6 Summary Comments

This chapter outlined the rationale, theoretical frameworks and procedures undertaken to address the research question and guide the study. As stated, the overall objective of the research was to explore, in depth, the lived experience of practitioners working in the WA prison system while making no claims for statements about truth. To accommodate the research aim, a combined framework, existentialism and interpretivism, was adopted to consider the uniqueness and locatedness of prison counsellors.

Data were collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore practitioners’ located understanding of their professional identity. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed and data were entered in NVivo8 for coding. The central analytical framework used to shape and manage the research findings was based on Thompson’s Personal Cultural Structural (PCS) model and the concept of embedment. Thematic analysis was conducted by categorising recurring ideas within the transcript data to identify key patterns (themes). The categories were further refined in accordance with Thompson’s model to enable a three-dimensional exploration of people’s identity and structure the findings into an overall coherent picture of what it means to be a prison counsellor. I located myself as an insider-researcher and discussed some of the challenges incurred with this ‘dual’ role while seeking to ‘stand aside’ from my preconceived assumptions and taken-for-granted notions about prison work to gain a fresh perspective. The following four chapters present the research findings.
Chapter 4: Connection with the Prison System: The Personal–Structural Interface

Drawing on Thompson’s Personal Cultural Structural model, the focus of Chapter 4 is the structure of the WA prison system, as perceived by participants. The chapter examines how structural issues (i.e., sociopolitical factors and structural variations across prison settings) impact on counsellors’ perception of their role and responsibilities, and their place within the system: the personal–structural interface. As identified in Chapter 3, Thompson’s structural dimension has been interpreted broadly to include aspects of the physical environment within which prison counsellors and the Prison Counselling Service are embedded. It should be noted that for the purposes of this discussion, the terms ‘(prison) system’ and ‘organisation’ are used interchangeably.

The initial part of the chapter focuses on the various pathways via which participants entered the Prison Counselling Service, their motivations for joining and initial expectations of their role within the organisation. Participants’ understanding of and response to the organisation as a politically driven system and physical structure is then examined. This is followed by a discussion of the extent to which they felt they could perform a counselling role given the organisation’s structural arrangements. Their views about the place of the counselling service within the prison system are also explored. The concluding section considers the extent to which participants’ experiences as helping professionals, and/or prison location, influenced their perceptions and understanding of the system and their overall sense of ‘fit’ within it.

4.1 Pathways to Prison Counselling

All participants in the study (14 social workers and 22 psychologists) indicated that they had entered a ‘helping’ profession as a matter of choice, based on a desire to assist people ‘less fortunate than ourselves’ (Morrison, 1990, p. 260). Although participants’ specific motivations varied, two main themes were apparent: collective/altruistic motivations, and life experience and personal issues. For example, when considering the reasons he entered the helping professions, one social worker’s response reflected an altruistic/collective focus:
I guess I’ve always wanted to just make a useful contribution to a more just and caring society—I think Martin Luther King was the one who inspired me with issues like that and I don’t pretend to be like him, but I guess if you can light candles in corners occasionally. (Counsellor 16)

For other participants, their choice of career was quite clearly influenced by ‘life experience’ and personal motivators including family background. One counsellor (a social worker) described her inclination to advocate for the disadvantaged as originating in her youth, having witnessed racism in the family home. Another participant (psychologist) identified her family background and emphasis on equality as foundational to her personal identity and subsequent career choice:

I thought of myself as feminist and why I came up with that—which is a core part of me—about equality, I grew up in a household where I think things were topsy turvy for us—my mum was the bread winner—my father was very ill so he stayed home and did all the home duties. We were brought up in a house where my brother and I equally shared chores—so one month I would mow the lawns, he would iron. (Counsellor 2)

Similarly, Counsellor 21’s motivation was also based on personal factors, but in this case, as a way of understanding and dealing with his own issues:

I always have been interested in people, their motivations and how they work. And psychology got me there. But I think the old adage about physician heal thyself, I think that was one of the overriding things that actually got me into psychology, because I had quite a few issues. Everyone does, but I was aware of my issues and I wanted to find out what can I do about them, so I went to uni.

The above comments are consistent with Brearley’s (1995) study of people’s motivation for counselling/helping work, conducted more than two decades ago, in which a spectrum of motivations ranging from collective/altruistic to life experience and/or personal needs were identified. Consistent with Brearley’s findings was that most counsellors’ responses, regardless of their discipline, contained elements of both motives:

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13 All quotations provided in the study are verbatim but hesitations, self-corrections, asides and identifying information have been removed to ensure clarity and anonymity.
I was probably quite lucky in that I was counselling kids when I was 14, so I probably found my niche then already, not counselling but I was trying to help them … I’ve always been interested in my own shadow and my dark side and I think it’s a projection onto people who are bad and I think I’ve had to claim my own bad side in life to be able to deal with my stuff, my own stuff. (Counsellor 9)

The values underpinning participants’ choice of work as social workers and psychologists (the desire to help others and respect for the person) are significant in the sense that they create a potential disjunct between a group of ‘helping’ professionals who work within an agency in which the primary focus is containment and regulation.

4.1.1 Preconceptions about Working in a Correctional Institution

According to Sun (2013), most correctional agencies require all counsellors to have ‘a demonstrated interest’ (p. 2) in working in this field before joining the organisation. However, in this study only four of the 36 participants expressed a distinct interest in working in a prison before joining the Prison Counselling Service. Of the remainder, 16 had no previous inclination to work in a correctional institution, and 16 were either ambivalent or impartial. This finding is significant in that people’s perceptions of the prison system could potentially have been coloured by the extent to which they wished to be there.

The descriptions of those who expressed no inclination or interest generally implied a negative preconception of prisons and prison work:

- ‘I really could not see anything worse than ending up working in a prison’ (Counsellor 10)
- ‘I always thought I would never do that’ (Counsellor 17)
- ‘I have to pinch myself and think how on earth did I end up here?’ (Counsellor 4).

For Counsellor 18, exposure to the criminal justice system as part of her tertiary education was enough to convince her that a prison setting was not an appealing place to work:

I did actually visit a prison when I was a student and I remember writing in my reflective journal, ‘I will never work in a prison’.
In addition, working with involuntary clients in a ‘value-laden environment’ (Trotter, 2006, p. 103) such as a prison was perceived by some participants as carrying stigma and not being a role with high professional credibility. In reflecting on the perceived disadvantages of working as a psychologist in a prison, Counsellor 17 stated:

[I] find in my profession, so not in the system now, but within my profession, that working in prisons is probably seen as probably the pits. I think they probably think that this is just not a good job. You know you’re working with the dregs of society. Other psychologists who’ve worked in prisons think it’s okay, but the others … the rest of them, and whether it’s because they think ‘oh my God’, like I used to think, how the hell could people work in prisons?

The frequent reluctance about working in a prison environment identified by many participants accords with the observations of several other writers. Williams (1996), for example, commented that ‘counsellors … are drawn (sometimes almost as reluctantly as their clients) into working with criminal justice agencies’ (p. 1). Similarly, Crighton and Towl (2008) identified the long-standing difficulties associated with enticing professional staff to work in prisons in the UK, noting that a policy of recruitment had been introduced to overcome this problem as far back as the late 1940s.

4.1.2 Reasons for Joining the Prison Counselling Service

Reasons given for joining the Prison Counselling Service varied, and in many cases, involved a combination of factors. Three quarters (28) of participants indicated that they had applied for the job out of financial necessity and the need to work. The limited job opportunities available in their respective fields was often given as an additional reason:

I avoided all the placements … I wasn’t going to work in a prison, no way. But then when I came out there wasn’t a lot of jobs going and I think halfway through the year, like I was putting in for lots of jobs and I went for three interviews and didn’t get those ones. And in the end, I think it came through [university] that Corrective Services had jobs going and so I got in touch with [the manager] and we had an interview and got a job. (Counsellor 13)

A third (12) of all participants discovered the job advertised through media outlets and thought it sounded interesting so decided to apply, despite their initial reservations about working in a prison. A further nine heard about the position through personal relationships and university networks and chose to apply out of a combination of interest and necessity. When discussing her individual pathway into the prison service, Counsellor 32 identified a friend as instrumental in her decision to apply:
I just fell into it. I had no particular interest, it was only because a friend, who was working in the Department, put forward my name for a contract position at [prison x] and I thought I’d just have a shot at it.

Six participants were introduced to correctional work in a field placement/practicum during their social work or psychology university education. They were subsequently offered a position in the Department, either in a community setting or the Prison Counselling Service. Three of these participants spoke positively of their first experience in this environment and said they had felt accepted by the prison counselling team, which had contributed to their decision to join. Counsellor 26 stated:

I think that’s what drew me to this team when I first did my placement here. I loved it here. I mean, I felt immediately accepted and it’s a sense of belonging, and I think everybody wants that.

Other participants gave more ‘strategic’ reasons for deciding to apply for the position, reasons that were closely aligned with their personal and/or professional objectives. Personal factors such as location and convenience were identified by some: ‘When I first got the job I kind of got it because we wanted to live here’ (Counsellor 20) and ‘I’ve got family in [X] and family in [Y] and I said, well if I come back here I’ll probably have to live in the middle’ (Counsellor 1). Others were influenced by professional objectives. For some, working with prisoners was considered a specialised field and an opportunity to gain clinical experience before eventually leaving and branching out into areas such as private practice. One counsellor identified her long-held desire to work specifically with women as a driving factor, and applied when she saw an advertisement for a position in a women’s prison. Three others stated that they wanted to work for a government department to fulfil professional requirements:

A government job could get me the supervision I needed and would give me the level of challenges, the work I needed, at that master’s level. (Counsellor 4)

Despite these counsellors having had little or no inclination to work in a prison, the literature suggests that more pragmatic approaches to employment decisions, such as those indicated above, can have positive repercussions. According to Thompson (2010), an individual who makes a strategic decision to accept a work position is more likely to feel positive and more empowered than someone who accepts a job out of necessity and/or because of limited options. Moreover, it appeared that some people had also
managed to find an immediate sense of connection and ‘fit’ on joining the service, despite any initial reservations they may have had.

4.2 The Prison System: Sociopolitical Considerations

Some authors have identified the need for workers to understand the broader factors that shape their practice contexts to function effectively (Crighton & Towl, 2008; Healy, 2005). The findings of this study suggested various understandings among participants of the factors influencing, and pressures placed on, the WA prison system. Experience often appeared to be an important mediating factor in this regard.

A third of participants recognised the political nature of the system in which they were embedded, and the influence of media and public sentiment. These participants represented both professional groupings (social worker/psychologist) and mostly had extensive experience as helping professionals within and outside of the prison, either as counsellors and/or in other roles. They could identify positively with the organisation’s overall objectives while also recognising the inherent limitations and frustrations of working for a large government department, particularly one characterised by changing political trends and varying emphases on punishment and rehabilitation. For example, Counsellor 20 stated:

I think that is another one of those things that with the political tide it changes as well. So sometimes I’ll notice that there’s a really big emphasis on rehabilitation and we’ve really got to change these guys, we’ve got this golden opportunity, we’ve got these guys in here and we can force them to do these programs and things like that and that’s really great. And then the political tide will change and it’ll be right, retribution, you know punishment, sucked in … you know you’ve done this bad stuff so this’ll teach you and make sure no-one else does it.

Funding for prisons and prisoner rehabilitation was identified by three of the more experienced people as a contentious topic within the public domain, supporting Williams’ (1996) view that criminal justice agency clients were ‘not the most popular of causes’ (p. 130). A perceived societal indifference and under-resourcing of prisons was clearly a source of frustration for these participants, who regarded the public as being largely unaware of the broader monetary implications of incarceration on society:
The community doesn’t want the government to give prisons money—they want schools, they want hospitals—so you’re always going to be working with these limitations as much as if the community were aware this is actually costing them a lot of money in terms of recidivism, and health care and all of those things because of mental health. (Counsellor 2)

Others expressed frustration about representations of crime within the media, which they perceived as frequently inaccurate, as ‘myth and fanfare about people in prison’ (Counsellor 30). These misrepresentations were perceived as fuelling public reactivity towards the Department regarding the need for a more punitive approach and subsequently restricting its capacity to implement rehabilitation objectives. Counsellor 30 summed up his frustration:

The thing about the Department is it’s a political animal, it’s driven by politics and public sentiment. The public crack a shit about anything, and we jump. Unnecessarily and ridiculously reactive, we will jump to whatever pretty much they want us to do. And that undermines the integrity of what we do.

Despite these frustrations, some (mostly experienced) counsellors thought that the Department was doing the best it could in the circumstances, particularly given the perceived lack of resources: ‘[It’s doing] a really good job’; ‘The ideas are there’. Another participant with many years’ experience in a leadership role within the prison system, did not regard the Department as solely responsible for the problems associated with offending, but regarded it as a broader systemic issue:

The justice system can’t prevent people coming into it. That’s not its role … and that’s where you start having to look … you now need to look to your other government systems and how can you use those systems to stop people coming into the justice system. (Counsellor 29)

This person’s view was consistent with the findings of a recent inquiry into WA prisons, which identified some of the problems facing prisons as ‘complex, intractable and require[ing] a whole-of-government approach’ (ERA, 2015, p. 57).

Although in agreement with the organisation’s overall mission, a third of participants, many of whom had worked in the Department for years, were sceptical and unconvinced of its capacity to rehabilitate prisoners and to prevent them reoffending: ‘If we can achieve that I think, we’d be wizards or something’ (Counsellor 20). Some people’s comments reflected an element of cynicism regarding the perceived ‘mismatch’ between the Department’s stated objectives and strategies related to prisoner rehabilitation and what they considered the ‘reality’. For example, Counsellor 34 stated:
I love reading the strategic plans and rehabilitation of offenders. I think that the justice system sells the public a lie and a big lie at that because they [prisoners] don’t get rehabilitated and now especially, lots of prisoners are having to do their full time, so if parole’s not an option they’re not even doing programs.

Although writing more generally, Beckett (2006) is also critical of the way in which government departmental policies are operationalised and ‘sold’ (p. 173) to the public, a process he described as ‘sweetening’ or of saying things in a way that is more ‘acceptable’ to provide ‘symbolic reassurance’ (p. 176).

Other participants, mainly those with more experience, were sceptical of the notion of imprisonment as a deterrent against future offending from their experience of working in the system (‘You don’t just get an epiphany by suddenly being locked up’). Two practitioners also regarded imprisonment as a training ground for future offending:

One of my clients said to me the other week, ‘I didn’t know how to do a break and enter until I came to prison. Now I know exactly how to do it’. I was like, great. I was like, oh that’s what we put you in here for, so you learn how to do break and enters, even better. (Counsellor 34)

The lack of through-care resources for prisoners transitioning into the community was also perceived as a major flaw in the system. This concern was shared by most participants, creating a degree of disillusionment that the work they had begun with prisoners as helping professionals was not being continued post-release. Counsellor 25, who had worked in several different agencies prior to joining the Department, commented:

I feel often that’s where we err is when they go back. I mean, we kind of fix them when they are in the prison and we build up their hopes and we put them through all these wonderful programs and we give them all the therapy and then they go home to the same old, same old problems.

This counsellor perceived the current situation as personally disheartening, her comments reflecting a sense of disjunct between her aspirations as a helping professional and the ‘realities’ of working within this system:
No wonder people have got no confidence in us, because we’re not doing what we say we are doing and I don’t believe we’re always doing the right thing by our people, and it frustrates me. It frustrates me if people come into the prison and say many times, the time when they want to address their offending behaviour is when they come in … We’re not getting to them when we should be getting to them, and that frustrates me endlessly.

Many of the concerns expressed above are supported by the literature. Regarding the organisation’s stated goal of rehabilitation, Alexander (2000) argued that the concept suggests that ‘something wonderful is going on in prisons’ (p. 2) but that it is counterproductive because it often results in sentencing judges incarcerating offenders who would be better served in the community. The Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (2014) report also found inadequacies in many aspects of prisoner rehabilitation and their reintegration into the community, and identified systemic issues, such as poor departmental planning and inadequate resourcing, as key contributing factors.

4.3 The Physical Environment: A Challenging Workplace

A perception common to all participants was of the prison as a harsh and adverse environment for both counsellors and prisoners. It was frequently described in emotive terms—‘hostile’, ‘oppressive’, ‘unforgiving’ and ‘toxic’—and likened to ‘a concrete jungle’. Most people described working within this environment as stressful, with two issues identified: the risks to counsellors’ personal safety and the inadequacy of counselling resources.

4.3.1 Personal Safety Risks

The risk of physical harm to staff working within a prison environment is frequently identified in the correctional literature, with prison work described as ‘inherently dangerous’ (e.g., Armstrong & Griffen, 2004, p. 579). The potential threat to one’s life is ever present (OICS, 2005). Most commonly in this study, participants reported feeling threatened when they entered the prison grounds for the first time. Counsellor 20 described his initial impression of a prison as an unsafe environment in which to work:
I didn’t like it at first. When I did it years ago in Perth, I thought I would never do it again. I was a bit scared of just being in prison generally and I think it’s all the preconceived ideas about what goes on in prisons and are you going to get kind of stabbed in the back while you’re not looking and stuff like that.

Others spoke of ‘the shock’ and of feeling ‘shit scared’ while walking into a maximum-security prison, thinking to themselves ‘Oh my God, I can’t believe I’m here’. To some degree, comments such as these suggest that some counsellors’ initial reaction to the prison environment was influenced by their preconceptions of prisons, prison life and the threat of physical violence from people perceived as ‘dangerous’.

Situations in which counsellors encountered large groups of prisoners moving from one part of the prison to another were also regarded as potentially risky:

Just when you come out at 4 o’clock, there’s about three or four blocks [of prisoners] all come out together and there’s just like a wall of green around you and you think, you know what, if something goes down, we’re screwed. (Counsellor 12)

Similar sentiments have been expressed by Jenks and Fuller (2014):

In many prisons, and at any time, if the inmates acted in concert, they could overtake large areas of the institution. (p. 137)

Three participants also referred to incidents within WA prisons that had served as a salutary reminder of the need for caution when working within a prison setting. Counsellor 34 commented:

[We are] always mindful of the potential that at any point … [The prisoners] rioted here in ’98, they could riot again and there’s been times when, as a team, we’ve been very aware of an electric chemistry or a tension in the prison … You can feel it, when the musters go up. I think when our muster hit 700-odd … you can walk in there and you can feel it bubbling and you think, shit, where is this going to go? Is something going to escalate or is it just going to dip down the other side?

Another of the three recounted his experience of working in a prison where a non-custodial staff member had been held captive and brutally sexually assaulted by a prisoner in an area of the prison. His comments clearly indicated that the incident had been traumatising for both custodial and non-custodial staff within the prison:
I came back to the prison from my holidays and it was a very emotional place, and I guess the ripple effect continues to this day of those staff that were there at the time … For me there was a lot of expressed anger, I suppose my predominant memory in seeing certain prison officers being really affected by different ways, whether they sought transfers out to go elsewhere or left, retired, quit.

He then went on to say that following this incident, personal duress alarms for staff were introduced in the prison, and all cupboards and storerooms were fitted with a glass window.

Counsellor 5 described a situation at one regional prison when, for a period, counsellors were required to interview prisoners with no prison officers on site. After 18 months, the situation was rectified when counsellors refused to work in this location if required to do so alone. This counsellor went on to say:

That’s how the system used to work here … but it was a difficult time to have to go through doing that, setting those boundaries and saying it’s not safe, we’re not going to do it. (Counsellor 5)

Four people also identified aspects of the physical layout in the metropolitan prisons in which they worked as potential safety risks. One counsellor expressed concern about a part of the prison generally occupied by prisoners but where the latter were obscured from prison officers’ sight due to the location of their station. She described a specific incident that had been a source of some anxiety for her:

I always am a bit concerned about that little area there … there’s a guy, a prisoner, who is mentally unwell, very mentally unwell and actually doesn’t respond to medication that well and he’s a schizophrenic. And once I came ’round the corner and he was just hanging around, normally they’re walking away and you pass them. I went into outpatients and dealt with something which didn’t take very long and went out and I had to go back and as soon as I shut the gate he was still there and he’d been hanging around. I didn’t really know what he was doing, they don’t normally hover around there, they usually go and I’m also aware that he’s not stable and I know what he did. (Counsellor 13)

4.3.2 Resources

A second major concern was resourcing. This related to physical resources, such as office space and staffing, which were generally regarded as inadequate and/or inappropriate. This affected the extent to which counsellors felt able to perform their roles, and their sense of personal safety.
Regarding physical resources, one frequently identified concern was the overall lack of suitable places for conducting interviews with prisoners. This concern related to all prisons, both metropolitan and regional. In some cases, counsellors were required to interview prisoners in rooms or places that lacked privacy and/or were not soundproof. In others, counsellors had to compete with prison officers for space. At some regional prisons there were no spaces available for counselling at all, which meant practitioners had to interview prisoners in areas designated for prisoner visits, areas that were also frequently occupied by lawyers, officers and other prisoners. Counsellor 5 described her experiences:

Sometimes if we’re seeing someone in maximum who’s serving a punishment term or who’s in a safe cell, we don’t have those ideal counselling settings. There might be officers wandering past, noise going on and doors and grills banging and everything.

The physical layout of some interview rooms was also identified as inappropriate in some settings, often creating concerns about personal safety (e.g., if a counsellor needed to exit quickly). Counsellor 9 explained:

In fact, our offices, my supervisor told both of us, is shocking because if they came and did an investigation, we didn’t even know this could happen ... what do they call it, health and safety thing. They would sue us or sue the prison or whatever because I sit here, my desk is here and the door’s there.

Concerns of this nature accord with the observations of Huffman (2006), who, in writing about therapy in prisons, identified interview room design, specifically the appropriate positioning of the desk, as crucial to staff safety. Effective design ensures that the counsellor ‘can get out of the office quickly without having to go past the inmate’ (p. 330).

Staffing levels were also perceived by many counsellors to be inadequate given the increase in prison numbers over the years. This view was expressed by counsellors working at both metropolitan and regional prisons: ‘We’re still functioning on the same resources that we’ve always had pretty much’ (Counsellor 13); ‘We’re still running on the same staffing levels we had when the prison had half the muster’ (Counsellor 5). There were also concerns that staff shortages resulted in counsellors not being able to give sufficient time to their clients during sessions. Counsellor 2’s comment illustrates the frustration that many participants appeared to be experiencing:
We’re understaffed, overworked and at times I can offer 15 minutes. What am I going to do with 15 minutes, except check in with you (prisoner)? So that’s a resource issue.

Counsellors’ perceptions correspond with reports published by the Inspector of Custodial Services, specifically the Directed Review of the Management of Offenders in Custody (2005). These reports identified the Prison Counselling Service as under-resourced and that despite increased prisoner populations and some minor changes, the number of prison counselling staff had not increased proportionally.

Constraints on the times counsellors were able to interview prisoners due to systemic requirements, such as prison regimes including lock downs and prisoner musters, were also identified. For example, one person described how each prison was in lockdown for prison officer training one morning per week, leaving counsellors with limited access to prisoners. Counsellor 14, an experienced prison worker, summed up the physical and procedural difficulties routinely faced by counsellors:

Between the hours of 8:00 and 11:00, you’re able to see prisoners and then between the hours of 1:00 and 4:00 you’re able to see prisoners so I like that, it’s that structure. But then at the same time something simple can happen, like muster’s wrong or someone’s [prisoner] on the roof or there’s a screwdriver gone missing from motors and things like that, and everything just stops. Like don’t get me wrong, it has to, because of the environment we’re in but it’s very frustrating when you’ve got programs to do or you’ve arranged to have counselling with someone you know that they desperately need it but then you can’t get out and you can’t get a message because all the staff are tied up with the person being on the roof.

4.4 Defining the Role: Constraints and Ambiguities

In Chapter 2, several factors determining how the Prison Counselling Service is structured and operationalised in WA were outlined. These include geographical location, whether a combined or solely counselling role, part of a counselling team, prisoner population and security classification. Although these considerations did influence counsellors’ perceptions of their role responsibilities, participants’ comments also suggested varying interpretations of what prison counselling should involve. The lack of clear guidelines regarding the counselling role at the organisational level, coupled with the lack of any consistent definition of counselling in the literature, had impacted on many counsellors’ perceptions of their role and specific responsibilities. For some, this created varying degrees of frustration and anxiety. However, this
appeared to be less of an issue for staff located at one privately managed metropolitan prison, where roles within the service were more clearly defined.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the position title ‘prison counsellor’ as described in the Department’s job description form implies that ‘counselling’ is the designated activity. However, apart from the mention of general terms such as ‘adjustment’, ‘coping’, supportive’ and ‘other help’, the precise nature of the role is not identified. Moreover, practical guidelines as to how counsellors are to achieve their objectives are not made explicit, other than a reference to the application of ‘discipline specific professional knowledge, experience, skills and techniques’ (DCS, 2014). Time allocation guidelines for counselling sessions are also not provided. Except for one prison, the mandate for people working in a combined role is similarly vague. No clear direction regarding prioritisation or allocated time frames for designated tasks is documented. This has resulted in some confusion across sites, for example in relation to time allocation:

It has been made very clear you see them six sessions and then that’s it. So I don’t know whether it’s just a [name of prison] thing because I see at the other prisons that’s not the way it seems to work. (Counsellor 25)

Although all 36 participants did identify risk assessment and short-term crisis intervention as the primary requirement, there was a consistent view that this was not ‘real’ counselling.

Primarily it’s risk assessment and intervention, so self-harm, suicide, risk assessment so a lot of it’s crisis work, short-term interventions and supportive counselling. When we’re lucky enough to have the time, we get to pick up a few extra clients to do some longer-term work. There’s probably less of that now than there used to be. (Counsellor 32)

Counselling was widely interpreted as meaning longer-term interactions with clients and was generally identified as the most fulfilling aspect of the role (‘[it’s] my passion’, ‘more satisfying’, ‘gives us the reward’). However, many stated that opportunities for longer-term work were limited and mostly available to counsellors working at either minimum-security facilities in the metropolitan area or some sentenced prisons. This limitation was a source of frustration and did not meet with participants’ initial expectations and aspirations of the position, particularly new practitioners whose practice bias was ‘therapeutic’:
I’d like to do a lot more individual counselling. We are kind of like hamstrung a little bit with that, because we’re supposed to just do the crisis care stuff, you’re not supposed to have the long-term people … and you have them just for little amounts of time, so for me I find that a big frustration. (Counsellor 17)

As also outlined in Chapter 2, the term ‘counselling’ is often used in a variety of senses, particularly in criminal justice settings. This ambiguity was clearly reflected in participants’ varied interpretations of what constituted counselling. For example, two participants who were new to prison work and counselling stated, ‘It’s not really about counselling. It’s more risk assessment’ (Counsellor 23) and ‘We’re not really there to counsel. We’re there to do a self-assessment of their risk’ (Counsellor 3).

For many, counselling was associated more with ‘therapy’. However, opinions were divided as to whether ‘therapy’ was part of the prison counselling mandate or indeed an appropriate practice within a prison environment. One experienced practitioner, who had worked for several government agencies prior to joining corrective services, considered prison an ‘ideal time’ and ‘window of opportunity’ for therapy with some prisoners. This was based on his perception that prison was separate from the day-to-day chaos of many prisoner’s lives prior to their incarceration, but also because prisoners were mostly ‘sober’ (Counsellor 20) in prison.

In exploring the issue further, it also became apparent that interpretations of the meaning of ‘therapy’ and what it involved varied; in many cases, it was used interchangeably with ‘counselling’. This apparent confusion accords with Masters’s (1994) observation that the two terms are often used simultaneously in the correctional literature, with the precise nature of each activity remaining unclear. Although one experienced counsellor appeared able to differentiate between the two activities, his comments reflected the overall uncertainty that seemed to exist among participants as to what the prison counselling role specifically entailed:

I think there’s some role confusion with the Prison Counselling Service in terms of are we there for risk assessment only, or is it risk assessment and supportive counselling? Or is it supportive counselling or something else, more in-depth counselling, more therapeutic counselling?

Participants’ confusion and/or varying understandings of what counselling involved and the lack of clear guidance within the organisation had resulted in participants formulating their own interpretations of the counselling role.
4.4.1 Working with Risk: The Primary Task

Although the proportion of at-risk prisoners that counsellors were required to work with varied between sites, risk management and prisoner suicide prevention were uniformly acknowledged as organisational priorities. This was particularly the case for counsellors working in remand prison settings, where the proportion of at-risk prisoners was identified as higher than at other prison settings. Working at this location was described as particularly stressful due to workload demands:

- ‘It’s just flat out, it is panic, some days it’s just bedlam.’
- ‘It’s a mill house, in and out, in and out, move it on there.’
- ‘It’s just crisis, crisis, crisis and there’s lots of it.’

In addition, a recent sudden change in prison policy for assessing prisoner suicide risk had impacted on different prisons by varying degrees. In one metropolitan prison, for example, Counsellor 27 explained that the revised policy required practitioners to identify any prisoner experiencing an ‘adverse event’ and place them on a suicide risk list. However, no clear guidelines as to what constituted an adverse event were provided. Counsellor 29, who worked in the same prison, also commented that this policy had resulted in dramatic increases to counsellors’ workloads, creating ‘a huge amount of pressure’. The negative impact of sudden changes in policy in public-sector organisations such as criminal justice has also been identified by Williams (1996), who identified confusion and stress for workers as a frequent consequence.

The four counsellors who worked as sole practitioners (three in metropolitan prisons and one in regional) faced a different type of pressure related to working with risk. Although these counsellors stated that the number of at-risk prisoners at these sites was minimal, decisions regarding prisoner suicide risk rested solely with them and was a source of considerable anxiety for three of them. Counsellor 28 referred to the life-affecting impact of prison policy and the assessments made by counsellors (on both counsellors and prisoners) when, for example, prisoners perceived as high risk needed to be transferred to a crisis care unit at another prison:
So one of the things that comes up here from time to time is I must make a call on whether or not a woman is able to stay here and I have had to send people back because that’s happened a few times. So that’s something that is unique in a sense to this role [and setting], that because there’s nobody else to ask and it does fall entirely on me and it’s like, ‘So what do you think, [Counsellor 28] is she [prisoner] going to kill herself?’.

In addition, several participants based at regional prisons, where they worked in a combined role, admitted that they struggled at times to manage their at-risk prisoner caseloads given their other role responsibilities (treatment assessments and/or programs). Counsellor 1 stated:

Sometimes you seem to be on top of all the PrCS stuff and the ARMS stuff and you think well, you try to think it quietly because if you say it out loud it’s terrible—and you think okay we’re managing this and other times you look at the list and—‘Oh!’ . You just let off steam and you think okay how are we going to do this?

4.4.1.1. Professional Discord Regarding the Primary Task

As indicated previously, although attention to risk was widely acknowledged as a necessary component of the work (‘of crucial importance’ and ‘an important thing’), participants’ reflected an overall lack of professional ‘fit’ between this organisational requirement and their aspirations as helping professionals. With only four exceptions, and irrespective of prison location, the predominance of risk assessment/crisis work was identified by counsellors as the least satisfying aspect of the role, and regarded as a ‘technocratic’ exercise rather than a professional intervention.

Two participants who had indicated a strong preference for ‘therapeutic’ work suggested that the level of skill required for assessing risk was less than that required for working therapeutically. One of these two counsellors jokingly described himself as ‘very skilled at risk assessment’ and the response of the other implied that, for him, assessing for risk was a generalist rather than a specialist task:

So far, I’ve not found that part of the job terribly exciting because it’s something which I think most people, given some appropriate and minimum sort of training, should be able to assess. (Counsellor 24)

The administration tasks demanded of the role, such as writing case notes and fulfilling the ARMS reporting requirements, were perceived as reducing the already limited time available for longer-term counselling. A comment by Counsellor 32 illustrates the view
of most participants that bureaucratic requirements limited opportunities for ‘real’
counselling:

You spend a lot of time doing documentation or meetings or collecting
statistics and just generally covering yourself with documentation … We’ve
been directed to do more crisis work and less long-term work so that we can
keep up with workloads really. I much prefer the longer-term work and that’s
the satisfying stuff.

Some (mostly experienced) counsellors were also sceptical of the Department’s
approach to suicide prevention, which they regarded as reactive and not addressing the
underlying issues. This created some anxiety for them as it necessitated implementing
an approach that they did not perceive as effective and which conflicted with their
therapeutic aspirations:

Suicide prevention actually occurs long before there’s a threat … It’s still a
knee-jerk reaction because we know that working with people on
hopelessness, spirituality, cultural issues, family, social issues is actually the
way to address suicide—it’s not about putting a band-aid on it—it’s not about
a safe cell, or putting them in a gown, or taking away their razors, or pumping
them full of medications. It’s actually more about the other stuff. (Counsellor
19)

Many concerns raised about the place of risk management within the counselling role
have also been identified by the OICS. For example, the 2012 report on the functioning
of WA prisons cautioned against a primarily risk-management focus and approach that
neglected ‘the broader psychological needs of vulnerable inmates’ (p. 75). In addition,
the report emphasised the key role of counselling in preventing prisoner’s issues from
deteriorating into crises. Thompson (2012) also referred to the limitations of an
approach that focuses on ‘treating individuals rather than tackling the underlying
sources of distress’ (p. 22).

Although mindful of the political context and necessity for suicide prevention, the
comments of Counsellor 13 indicated a sense of frustration with the requirements of her
role and disillusionment with the organisation in general:
I think they’re just trying to get everything into tick boxes and make it all very black and white so they’ve got everything covered. But it’s not like that, there is always going to be grey and it doesn’t matter how much you try to structure and cover everything by tick boxes, you’re never going to be able to do that and in some ways, it actually makes it worse, taking that approach. And I think they’re trying to take that approach because they are removed from the grassroots and they’re more concerned with political ... how they appear and whether ... if something can go wrong.

Her comment corresponds with existing research on public-sector organisations in which a ‘culture of defensiveness’ (Thompson, 2009b, p. 155) and the emphasis on rules and paperwork to ‘cover your back’ is identified as detracting from the preferred task (Elliott & Schrink, 2009; Hawkins & Shohet, 2012; Mahoney & Daniel, 2006).

4.4.2 The Rehabilitation Role

As stated in Chapter 2, a primary goal of the WA prison system is to rehabilitate prisoners. Moreover, the emphasis accorded to rehabilitation in the Department’s description of the Prison Counselling Service suggests that rehabilitation is a key component of that service (DCS, 2009b). The findings of this study revealed a range of opinions regarding the place of this responsibility and highlighted the complexities associated with working in a system in which a mixed set of purposes coexist.

Although most participants did not consider rehabilitation to be the focus of the Prison Counselling Service, some did regard it as an integral part of their role. Others, however, were adamant that rehabilitation was not a part of the prison counselling directive at all but the responsibility of programs (group work treatment programs):

- ‘Our mandate with PrCS isn’t to rehabilitate them, that’s programs.’ (Counsellor 17)
- ‘The PrCS mandate is also not about providing offender-based rehabilitation.’ (Counsellor 29)

Participants who currently or had previously worked in the combined role tended not to regard rehabilitation as a role exclusive to programs, but as part of the counselling role. Counsellor 5, for instance, described rehabilitation and preventing reoffending as ‘the overall goal of having a PrCS’. Counsellor 20 stated, ‘Obviously that’s what we try and do as psychs in the service is rehabilitation’.
To some degree, prison location influenced what counsellors perceived they could achieve in terms of rehabilitation. For example, one counsellor who worked in a remand prison did not consider it to be an appropriate component of their role:

> I think [rehabilitation] is a serious issue but professionally PrCS is not in the business of rehabilitating, that’s the way I see it. We’re here, at least at [name of prison], we’re here to manage distress, adjustment to being in jail and we make our contribution to people being able to function somewhat more effectively if they choose to.

The different views held by participants regarding whether rehabilitation was part of their role responsibilities can again be attributed, in part, to the lack of clarity of organisational guidelines, and counsellors’ interpretation of ‘rehabilitation’. As previously stated, several counsellors equated the term with ‘treatment’ (i.e., treatment programs). Similar to the ambiguity surrounding the meaning of ‘counselling’, the variation in counsellor interpretations of ‘rehabilitation’ is also reflected in the correctional literature (Crow, 2001; Masters, 1994). For example, in the past, rehabilitation has been interpreted as changing offenders’ behaviours (Masters, 1994). However, the term has since become synonymous with either ‘treatment, reform or resettlement’ (Crow, 2001, pp. 4–5), or as a ‘planned intervention that reduces an offender’s criminal activity’ (Masters, 1994). The comments of several participants reflected the latter interpretation. They thought addressing prisoners’ criminal behaviour and providing treatment was not a part of the prison counselling role—it was the responsibility of programs. In Counsellor 22’s view, this was what separated rehabilitation from counselling:

> I think if they’re coming to me for counselling then their crime’s not really that relevant … You’re treating your crime in your programs, the programs that you’re doing, not in counselling.

The issues raised by participants surrounding the precise nature of the counselling role are significant, not only in terms of the apparent confusion and discord this had created, but the stress caused for participants by the role ambiguity and conflict (Lambert, Hogan, & Barton, 2002; Obholzer & Zagier Roberts, 1994; Thompson, 2010).
4.5 Perceived Value and Place of the Counselling Service within the Prison System

Armstrong and Griffen (2004) argued that a worker’s professional identity and sense of belongingness are shaped by how their work is valued by the organisation. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, and drawing on Thompson’s Personal, Cultural, Structural (PCS) model, the Prison Counselling Service is embedded within a system in which each level is interrelated. Although the need for a counselling service is identified in the WA Prisons Act 1981 and formally acknowledged as a service within the Department (DCS, 2017c), the comments of most participants suggested a perceived lack of professional ‘fit’ among prison counsellors. While they regarded the service they provided as being of value (e.g., ‘I think it has an incredible amount of value’; ‘I think it’s a hugely important component’; and ‘I think what we do in there is worthwhile’), participants were less positive about how the service was perceived within the organisation and settings in which they worked. Comments included, ‘I don’t think we’re overly valued’ and ‘I don’t think the prison has a lot of time for PrCS’.

Counsellor 1 stated:

I feel frustrated often about the fact that we’re on the coalface and there’s a lot of people up on the top who might or might not know what you do, but sure as hell tell you when you don’t do the right thing. (Counsellor 1)

Participants’ opinions were based in part on the perception that resource allocation for the counselling service in terms of staffing and appropriate facilities for counselling prisoners was not a priority within the organisation. One counsellor commented:

I think—while it appears to have a legitimate space—and I think it has an incredible amount of value, I think it is devalued at a ground level. I think we are under-resourced, we always seem to get the worst office space, the worst computers, it’s almost like we’re an incredibly valuable and integrated space of this puzzle, but because we’re only seen as valuable if somebody’s suicidal, we’re not actually seen as instrumental in addressing behaviours and, therefore, being part of helping to manage offenders in prison. So, our only value to the prison system is suicide intervention and we’re given enough powers and resources to do that. (Counsellor 11)

Counsellors’ sense of being undervalued ‘in the social hierarchy’ (Thompson, 2007, p. 6) of the prison system was apparent from the disparaging terms used by several participants to illustrate the service’s perceived status:
• ‘the scapegoat division’
• ‘invisible entity’
• ‘a long history of being slapped’
• ‘forgotten, neglected and then dumped on’.

The lack of recognition of the service was illustrated in greater detail by another counsellor:

I don’t think we’re considered as important as some of the other sections of the Department—I would be surprised if a lot of people in other sections of the Department even knew we existed. We just seem to come and do our job. I would be even more surprised if the public knew we existed—we don’t have a face. (Counsellor 11)

Counsellor 26 perceived other staff (unspecified) as not appreciating the complexities of the prison counselling role, and her response indicative of a lack of connectedness with the system:

Some of them might think that we’re not an integral part, but I’d like to see them deal with all the chronic risk of whatever, and basically, we’re the go-to people. We often get the handballs. It’s like it’s PrCS this, PrCS that, PrCS this. I think that they might begrudgingly admit that we are essential. It depends who you asked.

Counsellor 32 described the Prison Counselling Service as ‘a poor cousin to programs’ and Counsellor 19 expressed some cynicism regarding the Department’s prioritising of group programs over individual counselling, again reflecting the view that the counselling service had less value within the prison system than other services.

I think the Department is constantly looking at programs for offenders that we know don’t necessarily work, as opposed to perhaps looking at more individualised services with offenders that probably would work. So, I think the focus in the Department is on programs, they’re certainly getting an awful amount of money at the moment and a lot of resourcing—so I think that’s where the focus is.

The concerns also accord with the findings of the 2010 OICS report, which identified a system-wide focus on the improvement of offender programs, with the Prison Counselling Service mostly ‘put to one side’ (p. 38) and ‘left to cope’ (p. 36).
4.5.1 A Sense of Separateness

Despite the Prison Counselling Service being formally identified as a service within the WA prison system (DCS, 2017c), there was a clear sense among participants of being marginalised, of feeling separate and more ‘outside’ the system than ‘within’ it. Counsellor 10 stated, ‘Unfortunately, I sort of see PrCS as on the outer fringes and not well integrated into [the Department]’. Counsellor 21’s experience also suggested that the Prison Counselling Service was not a priority in the prison system:

I had a problem getting a key allocated to PrCS for a long, long time. I now have, well the key was only allocated last week. So, it’s taken over 12 months for PrCS to have a key.

This perceived marginalisation has reduced counsellors’ sense of value as a professional group. Prison location appeared to be a crucial factor in this regard, with regional prison-based staff reporting a greater sense of separateness from the organisation than their metropolitan-based counterparts. This perception was attributed in part to geographical factors and distance from Perth. Two regional participants remarked on counsellors being excluded from personal development and training opportunities provided by the Department in Perth due to the financial costs involved:

We, as regional people, are being left out, that is generally the feeling. So if you want to do training, it costs too much money to get you up there and have accommodation if it’s just for one day. (Counsellor 36)

One counsellor described feeling disadvantaged, ‘left out’ and precluded from direct access to the latest practice knowledge as a result. Counsellor 17 described these situations as frustrating and attributed them to a lack of consideration of, and lack of communication between, head office and regional staff:

In the organisation, I do find [Offender Services] management sort of frustrating, because they don’t provide the training. They seem to provide training for other prisons, but our prison seems to miss out, like when we went to the PrCS conference and all of these people are saying ‘I had to come up for this training and had to come up for that training’. And we’re saying well what training was that? So, we kind of like seem to miss out on … I find that extremely frustrating.

This sense of marginalisation was even more pronounced for counsellors who worked in a prison that was structured and managed separately from other prison sites.
Although the issues they experienced in the role were similar to those of counsellors at other sites, their greater sense of separateness was reflected in comments:

- ‘I feel quite removed from DCS. I feel I don’t know anything about it.’
- ‘I feel separate and different.’
- ‘There’s not a lot of interaction with us. They just tell us when we’re not doing the right thing.’

The prison in which they were located was outside the broader system, with no opportunities for counsellors to move around within the WA prison system.

The overall sense of separateness experienced by participants is perhaps not surprising in the light of comments made in OICS reports (e.g., 2012, 2010) and by Williams (1996). The latter observed that, ‘counselling is marginalised in criminal justice settings’ (p. 32). Significantly, apart from the OICS reports, the Prison Counselling Service receives only minimal acknowledgement in the WA correctional literature. Any references made to it are mostly contained within a general list of prison services and facilities with no specific details provided about the service or rationale for why it is needed.

4.6 The Personal–Structural Interface: Impact of Experience and Location

During the interviews, it became evident that participants’ experiences of and views about the prison system from a structural perspective were often influenced by the extent of their experience. In many cases, the location of the prison in which they worked was a contributing factor.

There were many variations of experience, related to both ‘length’ (number of years) and ‘breadth’ (contextual). People described as ‘experienced’ included those who had worked for an extended time within the prison service and/or who had extended professional experience outside the prison service. Those described as ‘inexperienced’ were both new to the prison service and had minimal or no experience as a helping professional. The extent of people’s external experience as a helping professional and their direct experience within the prison system also varied, with some people having had experience of only one prison and others having worked across the prison service.
For discussion purposes, ‘length’ in terms of experience has been broadly interpreted as people who have worked for three or more years as a helping professional, including time employed in the Prison Counselling Service. Table 4.1 provides further details.

Table 4.1: Participant Experience as a Helping Professional (‘Length’)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3 years or less</th>
<th>More than 3 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes time working in the Prison Counselling Service

In terms of defining ‘breadth’, experience relates to participants who had worked in at least one other prison or external organisation/agency. Table 4.2 provides further details.

Table 4.2: Participant Experience as a Helping Professional (‘Breadth’)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 prison only (no other agencies)</th>
<th>1 prison only + 1 other agency*</th>
<th>1 prison only + &gt;1 other agency*</th>
<th>More than 1 prison (but no other agencies*)</th>
<th>More than 1 prison + &gt;1 other agency*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Prior to employment with the Prison Counselling Service

Appendix 4 provides more specific details of how experience has been interpreted. Location has been defined in terms of whether a prison is regional or metropolitan, unless otherwise indicated (e.g., remand prison or prisoner security classification).

The influence of experience, in terms of both length and breadth, was particularly reflected in participants’ perceptions of, and views about, the purpose and place of the prison system and the role of government more broadly. It also affected their response to the prison as a physical structure.

Experience in other organisations prior to joining the Department, particularly when the role had involved working with client groups and/or environments regarded as ‘challenging’ (e.g., Department of Child Protection [DCP] or agencies concerned with drug- and alcohol-related issues), appeared to have better prepared them for the various demands and complex issues associated with working in a prison system, compared with those with less experience. Counsellor 25 stated:
I started out with the Department of Welfare, so that kind of equipped me nicely for what I’m doing here. Did a little bit of everything, and so basically, I think it would be similar to DCP plus Centrecare plus the probation services, everything in one, so we really did everything. We did court social work, we visited the prisons, we ran programs, we got involved in juvenile justice, we worked with the alcoholics … so it was really a role that fully prepared me for this.

Conversely, counsellors who were new to the role, and/or only had experience of one prison setting, had to learn the intricacies of counselling practice as well as managing the demands of the role within this complex and challenging environment.

In addition, counsellors who had worked across several prisons were able to provide a perspective that many others did not have regarding the structural variations between prisons:

I know that from having worked at other sites where they do things differently, like [prison location], there’s no musters and when I went to [prison location] I remember ringing up and saying, ‘I need to get prisoner Smith. What time can I call them?’ And the officer was like, ‘Now’. I’m like, ‘Well, don’t you have a muster?’ ‘No, we don’t. You can get a prisoner at any time of the day’. (Counsellor 34)

This experience also provided counsellors with an appreciation of the different challenges facing colleagues at other sites in terms of the physical layout of the prisons, the resources available to the Prison Counselling Service and how the system of imprisonment was operationalised in terms of prisoners’ progression from initial arrest to impending release. For example, Counsellor 35, who had both length and breadth of experience, having worked in both maximum- and minimum-security prisons in metropolitan and regional locations, observed a variety of ways in which the rehabilitative objectives of the prison system had worked:

It was really good to be exposed to other sites and to know the [prisoners] that may end up at (Prison A) to have a visual and experiential sort of sense of oh yeah, they came from (Prison B) or from (Prison C). I mean, I visited (Prison C), spent a number of days there as well, it’s a minimum security, [prisoners] who are on the way out so to speak and it was actually quite delightful to see [prisoners] that I’d seen years before [on remand], who were on their way, approaching being released and to see a real stabilisation having taken place in their mental health or just in their general outlook and to get glimpses of how their relationships have progressed or who was visiting them and it was really lovely actually.
The prison setting in which counsellors were located, and their allocated role within that setting, also appeared to influence participants’ views about the system in which they worked and their place within it. Regional counsellors seemed to experience a greater sense of marginalisation within the overall structure of the prison system, as did those based at one separately managed metropolitan prison. In addition, counsellors based at regional locations whose role included both counselling and programs seemed more likely to embrace rehabilitation as part of the counselling role rather than a programs responsibility.

4.7 Summary Comments

Chapter 4 has described how participants’ perceptions and sense of connection as helping professionals within the WA prison system are, to some extent, structurally related. Overall, the findings indicate an element of tension, and in some cases, discord for counsellors at the personal–structural interface. This can be attributed in part to the fact that the vast majority of participants had no previous inclination to work in a prison or as a prison counsellor before joining the Prison Counselling Service. Thus, the starting point for practice was mostly one in which a strong sense of personal, professional and organisational ‘fit’ was initially absent. At a broader level, the inclusion of a counselling service within a structure of this nature (which as noted in Chapter 2 has been likened to a paramilitary organisation), created a tension that required continuous work and understanding from practitioners.

The extent to which practitioners could establish a sense of connection and professional identity varied widely. Experience as a helping professional, in terms of both length and breadth, was a key factor in this regard. Counsellors who had extensive experience as helping professionals in other agencies prior to joining the Department had a broader understanding of the limitations placed on the prison system in terms of resourcing and public perceptions. They were also better able to cope with the demands and complexities of the counselling role than their less experienced counterparts. Location was also a key influencing factor, with counsellors in regional prisons generally experiencing a greater sense of ‘separateness’ from the system.

Regardless of experience and location, the consensus was that the prison environment was a difficult, and at times dangerous place in which to work, and a source of stress and anxiety for many participants. These concerns related largely to resourcing and staff
safety, which many perceived as being overlooked by the organisation, or as not regarded as a high priority. In addition, the apparent ambiguity surrounding the precise nature of the counselling role was a source of frustration, and/or professional dissatisfaction for many, as was the emphasis on risk assessment, which was regarded as a constraint and counter to most participants’ expectations of what the role would—or should—entail.

The combination of these factors had left many counsellors feeling somewhat disillusioned with the organisation, not only to the extent to which it was perceived as fully committed to its aims of supporting and rehabilitating prisoners, but also to the implications of this for the counselling service in terms of the guidance and support it did (or did not) receive. Unsurprisingly, many counsellors felt undervalued and marginalised as a professional service within the system. Despite this, most participants did express a belief in the value of the counselling service and regarded it as a vital component of the prison system overall.

As stated at the outset of this chapter, although the above structural or ‘systemic’-related issues emerged as prevalent themes, the variation in participants’ experiences and views is also recognised and highlights the importance of considering Thompson’s ‘personal’ level: in other words, people’s unique characteristics and ways of being-in-the-world. It also includes the professional motivations, aspirations and life experiences that each individual brings to these encounters. These play a key role in determining the extent to which workers can remain professionally/organisationally congruent.
Chapter 5: Connection with the Culture

In Chapter 5, the focus shifts to the cultural context and the nexus of staff relationships that impact on counsellors’ experience of working in a prison: the personal–cultural interface. The term ‘culture’ (as defined in Chapter 3) is used in the broad sense to refer to commonalities between groups of people, sets of norms and habits including taken-for-granted assumptions and unwritten rules, and ‘shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing’ (Thompson, 2012, p. 33). In foregrounding the Cultural level, and drawing on Thompson’s model, this chapter explores how the different relationships affect participants’ sense of professional identity and ability to operationalise their role. It also examines how counsellors understood and negotiated their relationships with other staff working within the system and their sense of belonging (or not) within it.

For the purposes of this discussion, three major staff groupings working within the prison system are identified. These groups are:

a) Custodial staff: The ‘hands-on’ uniformed staff within the prison settings, includes on-site prison management (superintendents and deputy/assistant superintendents) and prison officers. Generally not qualified to undertake work of a clinical nature.

b) Prison counsellors: Professionally qualified staff (social workers and psychologists). May be employed to do counselling, group program facilitation, treatment assessments or a combination of these roles.

c) Offender services management: Non-custodial managers based off site at head office. Some are clinically qualified.

The first two groups are counsellors’ immediate colleagues, while the third is the management body responsible for overseeing many of the services provided to offenders in the prisons, and with whom counsellors have an indirect relationship. Each group has its own responsibilities and varying degrees of internal coherence, normative assumptions and behavioural rules. Hence, they can be regarded as ‘subcultures’ within the broader prison context.
5.1 Nexus of Relationships

In writing about the culture of organisations, Payne (2002) commented that organisations may be sites of ‘contested values, practices and symbols’ (p. 233) between different groups of workers. The culture within a prison comprises two sets of competing imperatives, containment and rehabilitation, which are ideologically based and operate side-by-side. The first of these imperatives is reflected in a ‘command-and-control culture’ (Peryer, 2002, p. 299) typically associated with regulation and the military, the second with remedial and restorative work customarily associated with the helping professions.

The overall findings of this study indicated that the relationships between the groups were often strained. This could, at least in part, be attributed to a lack of common ground between them in terms of values and beliefs related to the management of offenders and/or business pressures related to outcome priorities (i.e., performance indicators). The findings also indicated that custodial staff were the dominant subculture within the prison environment and that this situation created several challenges for participants in terms of their relationships with on-site prison management and prison officers.

5.2 Connection with Custodial Staff

Thompson (2011) referred to ‘the network of power relationships which map out the hierarchy’ (p. 245) in an organisation, and claimed it is crucial for workers to understand how the ‘formal and informal power relations’ (Thompson, 2009b, p. 71) operate if workers are to do justice to the complexities of clients’ lives and the problems they encounter. As outlined in Chapter 2, in the WA prison service a clear hierarchical structure operates in each prison setting among custodial staff. The prison superintendent represents the highest authority, with responsibility for all staff working within the prisons, including prison counsellors.

5.2.1 Relationships with Prison Management

Participant perceptions of ‘on-site’ prison management were mainly positive although some variations were apparent and generally influenced by prison location. Most commonly, regional counsellors reported a more positive working relationship with custodial staff, and particularly prison management, than did counsellors at
metropolitan prisons. Implicit in participants’ responses was that a relationship of trust, with shared understanding and clear communication, had been established with prison management. One counsellor, who had worked at several metropolitan and regional prisons, described the working relationship between prison management and the Prison Counselling Service at two regional sites where she had worked as ‘a lot closer’ than at metropolitan prisons.

Relationships were regarded particularly positively by participants working in regional prisons, where they felt that their professional expertise was valued by prison management and because of this, experienced a sense of belonging. In general, these staff also seemed more confident in ‘owning’ their professional authority than did counsellors at metropolitan prisons. For example, Counsellor 36, who worked in a northern regional prison, spoke of her positive relationship with prison management and of feeling confident to report any conflict involving prison officers she encountered in the knowledge that the management would deal with the situation:

If an officer [gets] funny about it then I just go to the assistant superintendent and say ‘Listen, I’ve got a problem here that is your management [issue] so you have to deal with it. I have to deal with the prisoners’ and that works.

Counsellor 25’s comment also reflected a positive relationship between prison counselling staff and prison management at the northern regional prison where she worked. This relationship had resulted in her feeling she was an integral part of the prison culture:

The management will always go with what I recommend, and that kind of support has been really, really good. Even I can tell you our acting ASPM (sic) came to me the other day and he said to me, [Counsellor 25], if you feel things are getting too much, if you feel things are getting on top of you, you need to come and talk to me. Just come and debrief a little bit. And that means a lot. I mean, he doesn’t have to do that. It’s the same with our acting head prison officer as well, he came as well. In the meeting he said, listen, PrCS is really short-staffed so, guys [prison officers] think carefully when you do your referrals. Make sure that the referrals that you bring through are really PrCS stuff.

Similarly, another counsellor from a southern regional prison commented:
I’ve always found the operation managers, whoever they may be, when I was in the role, to be really available, supportive at PRAG [Prison Risk Assessment Group] meetings and debriefs. There was always a sense that you were valued and they listened to you and took your ... you know, I suppose expert role. (Counsellor 8)

However, there were some exceptions. For example, between two newly employed counsellors who were working in the same regional prison:

My colleague told me that the superintendent here is very supportive of PrCS. I’ve only been here for a short while though, but I’ve not seen that ... again, I’ve not experienced hostility, but I’ve kind of experienced more that we’re regarded more with disinterest or neglect.

This example also illustrates how each person’s experience of, and sense of belonging within this culture, is mediated by the ‘personal’.

Relations between counsellors and prison management at metropolitan prisons were identified as less positive and primarily at prisons that housed large numbers of maximum-security classification prisoners. This prisoner population ‘typically’ includes greater numbers of high-profile prisoners and people whose behaviour may be more disruptive than prisoners located at medium/minimum-security facilities. Most counsellors at these sites (metropolitan and maximum security) described relationships with prison management as acrimonious, a situation which resulted in counsellors feeling powerless to challenge cultural norms within the prison as to do so was perceived as futile. Counsellor 32 described relations with the management in the prison where she worked as ‘toxic’, indicating that the counselling service there was a subculture that felt unsupported and powerless to exercise any authority:

It got really bad at the point where I looked to get another job, we were being bullied, actively bullied by some of the prison management, and mental health nurse, and it was awful. And the other thing on top of that is we didn’t have any support from anyone above, our Offender Services Prison Management, nothing. It was like we are dying here, we are really struggling.

Participants also spoke of carrying significant amounts of stress related to not having any avenue for resolving their concerns. This was aptly summed up by two counsellors as ‘nothing much I could do about it’ and ‘pushing stuff uphill’.

Despite the negative view of their relationships with prison management among most counsellors based at these prisons, the perception of one participant with extensive experience in statutory settings was that there were occasions when the exercising of
power and authority by the prison management was legitimate. He gave the example of a prisoner who was refusing to go to hospital and commended the management’s skilful use of their power and ability to achieve results with prisoners which, in his view, prison counsellors were often unable to accomplish:

The assist (sic) super was really good. He rang up the people who do the escort, clarified how they’d do the escort, got [the prisoner] back in, we got the senior officer (SO) in and we stood there and talked to him [prisoner]. The assistant superintendent (ASPM) says, ‘Well I’m trying to work with you [prisoner] not against you’. ‘But I’m [prisoner] really scared about this’. And the SO and the ASPM were matter of fact, ‘This is what’s going to happen, I’ve done the best I can, tomorrow we’ll do this we’ll go over and talk to them’. So, he [prisoner] said ‘Yeah, I’ll go’. (Counsellor 16)

Overall, the variation in participants’ perceptions and experiences regarding their relationships with prison management, and their sense of empowerment, appeared to be very much influenced by structural factors and whether they worked in regional or metropolitan prisons. Although the reason for this is unclear, it is possible that geographical factors such as isolation/remoteness and size of the prison may have been influential in terms of greater opportunities for the development of positive staff relationships in regional areas. It also highlights the interrelatedness between the various levels of Thompson’s model.

5.2.2 Relationship with Prison Officers

The dual responsibilities of regulation and rehabilitation that coexist in the WA prison system clearly created tensions at times between professionally qualified prison counsellors and the ‘hands-on’ clinically unqualified prison officers. While more than half the participants acknowledged there were ‘some’ excellent officers, participants also struggled with what was perceived as some officers’ prejudicial behaviour and disparaging remarks towards prisoners and prison counsellors at times.

Problematic relationships between uniformed and non-uniformed staff in prisons are documented in the literature as not new (Jenks & Fuller, 2014; Morris, 2001; Polizzi & Draper, 2010; Sternbach, 2000; Thomas & Stewart, 1978). Thomas & Stewart (1978) commented that this issue was ‘no different to anywhere else’ and likely to remain so (p. 181).
5.2.2.1. Prejudicial Responses towards Prisoners

For counsellors, the primary source of discord between them and prison officers was the perception that prison officers subscribed to punitive cultural norms regarding prisoners. These officers were identified as treating prisoners harshly and determining to make their lives more uncomfortable whilst in prison. The majority (29/36) of participants had witnessed what they perceived as inappropriate behaviour towards prisoners, and this had caused anxiety for some counsellors when endeavouring to perform their role. One counsellor described feeling more traumatised by the injustices she saw towards prisoners than the crime the prisoner had committed.

Officers’ behaviour towards prisoners was described in emotive terms such as ‘harsh’, ‘dreadful’, ‘racist’, ‘atrocious’, ‘couldn’t care less’ and ‘antagonistic’, with some officers perceived as ‘corrupt’. The following responses further illustrate the predominant view:

I said, ‘By the way someone said that he [prisoner] was a piece of shit’. [Officer] goes, ‘Yeah, that was me. So?’ (Counsellor 3)

You also get officers who I think who sometimes antagonise prisoners. I think there is a culture there where ‘they are prisoners and they deserve hardship, and we are officers and it’s our role to give them a bit of hardship’. (Counsellor 20)

Things that were personalised towards a prisoner used to make me really upset, when it was a personal decision directed at a prisoner from one of the officers, just because he got enjoyment out of victimising and pushing that person’s buttons because it was something to do. I mean, that, I struggle with that. I still do. (Counsellor 26)

Most counsellors perceived some officers as unsuited to the role because of their punitive attitudes towards prisoners (e.g., ‘some of them really shouldn’t be in the job’). However, few could give specific estimates of the proportion of officers they regarded as unsuitable. For the six who did, figures varied widely and ranged from ‘the minority’ to ‘a large contingent’. These counsellors worked across four different prisons in both regional and metropolitan locations.

Participants’ concerns about the suitability of some prison officers for the role have been identified in other studies. For example, the Ombudsman’s 2000 study of WA prisons found that a proportion of prison officers, albeit a minority and unquantified, were possibly unsuited to people-work and seemed ‘unable and/or unwilling to interact
with prisoners in a constructive and beneficial way’ (p. 381). Further, Irwin (2005, as cited in Jenks & Fuller, 2014, p. 140) argued that the negative image of the criminal, which is claimed to persist in the prison officer culture, has resulted in officers ‘hating prisoners’. Similarly, Saunders (2001) referred to the ‘bullying mentality [that] can be seen in the officers’ culture’ (p. 30).

Two participants provided unprompted feedback on the cultural similarities they had observed between officers’ punitive treatment of prisoners and inappropriate staff behaviour with clients in other organisations such as psychiatric hospitals and residential facilities for people with disabilities. Similar to issues identified by Goffman (1968), authoritarian behaviour towards clients was perceived by one of these participants as fuelling discordant staff/client relations, and in a prison context, discordant officer/prisoner relations.

There are parallels in the way that I see and hear evidence of the way custodial officers speak to prisoners and the repercussions of that, the behavioural repercussions … so the person with the challenging behaviour really isn’t the person with the challenging behaviour, in my opinion, they’re not the person with the problem. The problem is the way that they are treated which causes the challenging behaviours. (Counsellor 31)

This same counsellor also stated that from both a personal and professional perspective, she did not subscribe to the overriding rules and behavioural norms associated with the custodial culture of the prison in which she worked. However, it appeared that despite the behaviours she observed as inappropriate, this counsellor’s experience of abhorrent staff behaviour in other settings had enabled her to find a certain sense of ‘fit’, even describing her current situation as ‘a doddle’ by comparison.

Participants’ responses also suggested an association between perceptions of officers’ prejudicial behaviour towards prisoners and prison location. Apart from a few exceptions, regional prison-based participants reported no major grievances regarding officers’ behaviour towards prisoners. However, this was not the case at primarily metropolitan, maximum-security, sentenced prisons. Counsellor 11 described the prison officer culture at one maximum-security prison as particularly severe (‘bred there very well’ and ‘the whole bash and crash thing’) with prisoners treated as ‘less than second-class citizens’. In other metropolitan maximum and medium-security settings, officers’ perceived stereotypical views and treatment of prisoners were regarded as
discriminatory and reminiscent of slavery and Australia’s colonial past. For example, prisoners were treated like convicts and slaves who deserved to be punished:

- ‘It’s bread and water and no TVs.’
- ‘Should be on a chain gang.’
- ‘We should just be giving them bread and water and black and white TVs, broken ones.’

Williams (1996) argued that counsellors working in the criminal justice system are responsible for confronting injustices they observe, yet with the knowledge that their attempts to do so may have limited effectiveness. The limitations to which Williams referred were most evident at metropolitan, maximum-security prisons, where counsellors spoke of their fear of being ostracised by prison officers if counsellors reported the indiscretions they observed to prison management or authorities (‘Those avenues are not safe’ and ‘My hands are tied’). They also feared that prisoners would be unfairly targeted by officers because of counsellors’ disclosures.

Counsellor 19 provided an example in which officers’ treatment of a young Aboriginal man placed in a punishment cell at one metropolitan, maximum-security prison was perceived to be inhumane. The treatment provoked a highly emotive response in the prisoner and prompted the counsellor to challenge what she perceived as an injustice:

So, he’d [prisoner] ordered chocolate bars—they [officers] had put his chocolate bars on their genital areas and went, ‘Here, eat that’. Basically, that kind of nasty stuff, and he [prisoner] lost it.

The counsellor went on to explain that by voicing her discontent and confronting the punitive behaviour she witnessed she was ostracised by some prison officers and her safety subsequently compromised when endeavouring to perform her duties.

Unit staff aren’t talking to me at all—they’re not looking after my safety—all within the parameters of, of course we have her in line of sight. They’re so subtle with it—so probably took me about six weeks, six weeks probably before they would even talk to me—some were better than others.

She described the experience as ‘uncomfortable’ and as evoking many questions as to how counsellors can practice within a system and culture that ‘probably doesn’t appreciate me, doesn’t want me interfering in their business’.
5.2.2.2. Prejudicial Responses towards Prison Counsellors

A further factor contributing to the sometimes-strained relations between counsellors and prison officers was the latter’s perceived negative views of the Prison Counselling Service in general, and lack of appreciation of what counsellors did. According to participants, some officers regarded the counselling service as ‘a waste of time’ and were ‘not convinced’ of the need for the service. Most commonly, participants commented on the derisive terms levelled at counsellors by some officers, which included ‘care bears’, ‘the tree huggers’, ‘do-gooders’, ‘the bleeding hearts’ and a revised acronym for the service: ‘PCS, the Prison Cuddle Service’. Counsellor 18 held the view that many officers felt the prison had functioned perfectly well before the Prison Counselling Service arrived and therefore, resented counsellors’ presence:

I think there are some prison officers who feel that before we came on the scene they were probably handling the situation and why do these goody-two-shoes have to come along.

Counsellors based at one metropolitan prison location commented on the remarks they had received from officers at the site, which were perceived as discriminatory and had resulted in tension between the two groups at times. This criticism was significant in that the counsellors were all women and the tensions they described concerned interactions with male custodial officers. One female counsellor stated that, following a prisoner’s request to see her, a prison officer declared, ‘Oh, he [prisoner] only wants to see you because you’ve got boobs’. Thompson (2012) has also identified problems related to sexist ideology within distinct cultural contexts, commenting that its influence can be ‘far reaching’ and can result in women being ‘demean[ed] and disempower[ed]’ (p. 59). Within the prison context, this issue was also identified in the 2005 OICS report on WA prisons, which found that ‘the culture does not seem supportive of women working within prisons, and there have been ad hoc reports of intimidation and bullying’ (p. 198).

However, not everyone perceived officer behaviour and gibes as offensive. For example, the view of one female participant was that prison officers’ style of humour and sarcasm was not personally directed, but ‘good natured banter right through to teasing’. Thompson’s (2012) views about the role of humour in cultural maintenance

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14 The majority, ‘77 per cent’ (OICS, 2014, p. 30), of prison officers in the WA prison system are male.
are relevant in this regard. He argued that most discrimination is unintentional but arises because of ‘institutionalised patterns of behaviour, assumptions and language use’ (p. 37).

Another male counsellor was of the view that officer attitudes towards counsellors were associated more with different values and the notion that prison counsellors were helping the perpetrators of violent crimes:

   It’s not personal it’s more about what I represent. ‘Here comes this guy to kind of come and make life better for this horrible, disgusting, vile human being and I don’t like that, so therefore, I don’t like him, so I’m going to make life hard for him’ … I mean there are a few guys [officers] who think that what I do, or what PrCS does, is counterproductive to their ideas of making life hard for the prisoners. So, they don’t really appreciate PrCS staff, whoever it would be. (Counsellor 20)

5.2.2.2.1. Metaphors about Context and Culture—Working in a War Zone

A further issue to emerge from the findings was the perception of some officers as uncooperative and often obstructive when counsellors attempted to carry out their duties (e.g., refusing to communicate with counsellors or refusing their entry into prison units to gain access to prisoners). This tended to be the case in metropolitan rather than regional prisons. Counsellors’ descriptions alluded to working in a war zone in the sense of having to navigate their way through a culture described as ‘a minefield’ and needing to be hypervigilant and pick their ‘battles’ when interacting with some officers.

Several participants, generally those with more experience, recognised the hierarchical nature of prison institutions and the power struggles that existed within a prison culture (‘You are constantly exposed to the power play that happens’). Counsellors’ apparent sense of ‘powerlessness’ vis-à-vis prison officers was a source of anxiety and frustration, as they were reliant on prison officers for protection. These findings again illustrate the dominance of the prison officer subgroup within this quasi-military culture, resulting in counsellors often struggling to challenge the cultural status quo.

Some experienced counsellors had adopted specific strategies when dealing with officers to address these issues: ‘There’s ways to fight your battles, you just learn to be smart about it’ (Counsellor 26). Counsellor 32, for example, spoke of the need for a placatory communication style and of needing to be ‘ingratiating’ and ‘grooming’ to secure the best outcome for prisoners. Counsellor 16 indicated that his experience
within the Department had taught him to be resolute and how to manage the numerous obstacles incurred when working within this culture:

You’ve got to pick when you want to have a fight because you could find 101 issues every day to go to bat for … I’ve come to accept that—I think first few years you’ve got to work that through and come to terms with it … but there’s always an edge to it. The whole thing about I need to work with the guys in green [prisoners] and the guys in khaki [officers] and the relationships are different. I need both those relationships to do something effective and sometimes their expectations are different and I’ve got to say, ‘Yeah, I understand why you’re [officer] doing this, yeah you’re bloody marvellous, yeah I understand why you feel pissed off’ and sometimes there are bad guys on both sides. There are officers who really are very abusive.

Four participants who had worked in the defence forces prior to joining the WA prison service commented on the parallels they had observed between prison officer culture and military personnel. Their comments suggested that the experience of working in a command-and-control culture had helped them make sense of a regimented prison system and culture, described by one person as ‘paramilitary’, and to some extent, had provided them with a sense of ‘fit’. One of these counsellors explained that she also felt that her defence force experience had provided her with greater insight into prison officers, and had enabled her ‘to understand [them] more, where they’re coming from, that sort of thinking’ (Counsellor 4).

Participants with experience of several prison locations also commented on the variations they had observed between prisons, as well as the prison officer culture between different settings.

I found [prison A] to be really … like their whole environment was really oppressive. And the staff as well, I found that the interactions between staff members that I could see, I found to be … I don’t think confronting was the … I don’t know how to describe it. It was just a bit of a shock … and just the way they speak about the prisoners and things like that as well … whereas at [prison B], we’re on a first name basis, [they’re] not called a crim. (Counsellor 27)

Counsellor 19 attributed the variations in prison officer culture to officers’ length of service in the custodial role, describing some officers as ‘set in their ways’. Her comments were also suggestive of someone whose experience of this system had helped her to understand the complexities involved:
I guess probably one of the biggest things that I’ve recognised is the different cultures of the different prisons—so one is about stereotypical stuff male versus female, the other is about sentenced and remand and then it’s about rural/regional and then it’s also about this culture, this set of staff. So, there’s lots of layers to it—that I think sometimes we miss—we go, this is prisons, and we’re all kind of the same, we’re all operating under the same rules and that’s not true. The personalities will tell you how the prison’s operating … So, the tone of that prison is completely different but if you took those staff and put them somewhere else, the tone of that prison would be different because now we have a different culture. So, I think there’s layers to the prison system.

5.2.2.3. Contested Values and Barriers

The different practice approaches of prison officers and prison counsellors can be explained, to some extent, by the respective beliefs and values underlying officers’ views of the purpose of prisons and the management of prisoners, and those informing the helping professions. As a generalisation, the focus of prison officer training is the containment of prisoners, although officers are also required to play a role in their rehabilitation and general welfare. Their understanding of offender prisoner behaviour is primarily based on their practical experience of working with prisoners. Prison counsellors are trained as helping professionals; the focus is assisting others, particularly people whose lives have been dominated by misfortune. Some participants seemed to understand this variation between the two subcultures, as the following comments suggest:

They (officers) generally come from a very different stance to us, from a very different mindset. (Counsellor 18)

I’ve got to be careful not to be judgemental of prison officers as a group and stigmatise them and judge them. (Counsellor 10)

As previously noted, over half of the counsellors interviewed acknowledged that there were some, albeit a minority, ‘fantastic’ officers, and that despite their lack of psychological training, they were ‘therapeutically minded’ and went out of their way to help prisoners:
You do get officers that … they’ll go an extra step for a prisoner and that is great, because it often makes life easier for the prisoner, it makes life easier for them. (Counsellor 20)

The other end of the scale as well, though with the officers who are really good. And they’re excellent, excellent. Particularly considering they don’t have the greatest training on how to manage some of these guys. So, the guys with the severe mental illness, but they do so well with them. It’s fantastic to see. (Counsellor 27)

These officers were perceived as enabling counsellors to practice in a manner that aligned with counsellors’ preferred approach, despite ‘the conflicting and competing roles implicit [in a prison system]’ (Stokes, 1994, p. 128).

Other participants were less sympathetic and were critical of some officers for not being ‘therapeutically minded’ and for lacking awareness about people in general, particularly prisoners identified as a suicide risk. These perceptions were mostly associated with prison location, and specifically participants working in metropolitan, maximum-security sentenced prisons, where officer attitudes were perceived as particularly punitive. Officers were often described as considering at-risk prisoners to be feigning their symptoms (‘He’s just manipulating’). This was a source of anxiety and stress for some participants, who stated they often struggled to educate officers about the reasons prisoners presented in a particular way. Self-harming behaviours as a coping mechanism was one example given:

Custodial staff don’t see instrumental self-harmers as at risk at all, they just see them as manipulative and they need punishing more than anything. They don’t see that there’s a risk attached to self-harming and sometimes someone [prisoner] might make a mistake and go too far when they don’t mean to and accidentally kill themselves. (Counsellor 13)

In addition, participants spoke of situations that created tension between the two groups owing to what counsellors perceived as officers’ lack of understanding of the confidential nature of counselling and the need for privacy. Counsellor 23 described a situation in which she was expected to counsel prisoners while monitoring the prison two-way radio she was required to wear. Counsellor 20 had to counsel prisoners assigned to punishment regimes with officers present and overseeing the interaction: ‘[Go] in there … have your counselling session, go on’. Williams (1996) also described the prison setting as ‘a constraint in itself’ (p. 32) and as one that prevents counsellors from ‘providing the kind of service they believe to be necessary’ (p. 31). However, in
the examples cited here, it should also be pointed out that these counsellors possibly overlooked the responsibility of prison officers to ensure counsellors’ safety.

5.2.2.4. Bridging the Divide

Ruch (2012) claimed that it is possible for work to be ‘on task’ and for a ‘work group’ (p. 1323) mentality to operate in organisational contexts in which a shared understanding of the complexity of the primary task is in place. The responses indicated that a shared understanding and work group mentality between counsellors and officers was mostly absent. However, the comments from several experienced participants suggested that they understood the complex nature of the prisoner officer role more so than others. They commented, for example, on the fact that officers had the challenging task of managing prisoners ‘24/7’, whereas prison counsellors were exempted from such a responsibility. Although not condoning punitive treatment of prisoners, there was also a recognition of officers’ competing responsibilities:

I believe that it is incredibly difficult to negotiate when your role requires that you supervise, punish, secure, and then you’re meant to provide welfare. I think they’re such opposing, demanding duties. (Counsellor 10)

One experienced counsellor identified that her own previous assumptions regarding officers’ perceived lack of competence were unwarranted and more to do with her own lack of confidence as a beginner practitioner. She was subsequently able to make sense of the situation by being mindful of the culture in which she was operating to appreciate prison officers’ perspectives:

Sometimes we’re not used to or don’t want to be questioned—we see ourselves as professionals, for me anyway when I first came in—why is that being questioned by someone who isn’t a professional? And I think that’s where the conflict is more than the officers because they’ve often been in the job for years, they’ve seen PrCS come and go, they know that we’re not always going to agree on a particular thing and for them it’s only about that small thing, whereas for me I guess at first I felt like my whole integrity as a professional was being questioned. Now I recognise that that’s not the case and it is just about this one small issue that we might be disagreeing on. Prison is a system where if you let something get to you, then it will. (Counsellor 5)

Counsellors from both metropolitan and regional prisons perceived many new officers as coming into the system with good intentions in terms of helping prisoners, but who had found it difficult over time to resist the powerful influence of the dominant prison culture, which tended to erode their initial aspirations:
A lot of them may come into their profession wanting something different, but there’s very much a prison culture here and if you stick out and you’re leaning towards the therapeutic or more empathic side, you’ll [new officers] get it beaten out of you pretty quick. (Counsellor 26)

A lot of them come in from their training really quite good and then some of the old guard retrain them like in the first month and they change, and we’ve actually worked with officers that we’ve seen change from when they came in new, to when they’ve been retrained by the old guard and they’re like ‘Nah, tell them to fuck off’. And it’s quite sad. (Counsellor 13)

Saunders (2001) has commented on the difficulties facing prison officers working within this system and culture, and claimed that for many officers it may be a safer option to subscribe to the ‘the herd mentality’ than to oppose it (p. 30). To a considerable extent, these issues reflect the observations of Crawley (2004) who, in drawing on the findings of Cooper’s 1997 survey of UK prison officers, identified the job of a prison officer as ‘one of the most stressful occupation[s]’, if not ‘the most stressful’ (p. 135).

Goffman (1968) has also highlighted the complex nature of the custodial role for staff such as prison officers who are in the business of ‘people-work’ (p. 73). As he pointed out, officers are required to control prisoners, maintain humane standards and in some circumstances, constrain prisoners who commit visibly self-destructive acts, tasks, which he argued, create an image of officers as harsh and coercive when attempting to prevent someone from further harm. Another factor that may contribute to the difficulties facing prison officers as noted by Jenks and Fuller (2014) is the greater emphasis on rehabilitation of prisoners over time. According to Jenks and Fuller (2014), this has resulted in officers’ work being downgraded in the sense that the ‘the clean work’ of helping prisoners has been replaced with ‘dirty work’ (p. 139) that focuses primarily on security.

The Ombudsman’s (2000) report into WA prisons identified prison officers’ alleged shortcomings as aggravated in part by inadequacies in the prison system itself. The report stated that officers had not received significant training for taking on a welfare role and found it hard to transition from a security-based role to one that required building relationships with prisoners. The challenges involved in building rapport with prisoners are identified in the Department’s description of the prison officer role (DCS, 2017).
Polizzi and Draper (2010) argued that although the cultural differences between custodial and counselling staff may at times seem irresolvable, areas of potential compromise can be found. When writing about WA prisons approximately four decades ago, Thomas and Stewart (1978) suggested that ‘the most hopeful method’ of bridging the division was ‘to encourage dialogue in which differences can be aired if not buried’ (p. 181). In this study, participants whose comments suggested that they were confident in their role sought to foster collaborative relationships with prison officers through communication, and encouraged team members to do likewise. Counsellor 35 noted that without officers’ cooperation, it was difficult to work effectively with prisoners. Regular interactions with officers such as ‘having a cup of coffee in the staff room’ were identified by another counsellor as a beneficial strategy and a valuable opportunity for gaining officers’ perspectives on prisoner behaviour:

> While you might disagree with their opinion on why a prisoner is doing something and often we do, it’s still information that is good for you to know, you need to have their input. (Counsellor 4)

Establishing positive working relationships with prison officers was also regarded as an opportunity to indirectly improve relations between officers and prisoners. Some counsellors endeavoured to broach the ‘us–them’ divide (Polizzi & Draper, 2010, p. 16) by attempting to educate officers on better ways of relating to prisoners so that prisoners were treated less harshly. Counsellor 16 identified educating officers as an important part of his informal role:

> I might be able to see five prisoners a day, but the officers see 50 or 60, so if I can coach some of them [officers] and that can improve their interactions with others, or give them information or ideas—now I don’t think that’s in the formal job description, but certainly that’s part of my attitude to the whole thing. (Counsellor 16)

In general, the findings related to counsellor–custodial staff relationships indicated that these relationships were difficult at times and, for some counsellors, a major source of distress. Custodial staff clearly set the mood and tone within prison settings and held the referential power. Because of this, counsellors often chose to remain silent rather than challenge cultural norms.
5.3 The Counselling Team: A Key Mediating Variable

Morrison (1990) observed that a healthy team ‘can create powerful and positive sub-cultures which can sustain, motivate and empower staff’ (p. 13). Also, Thompson (2010) pointed out that a sense of belonging within groups of people is enhanced when there are shared ways of thinking and doing, which he argued provides reassurance to people (p. 114). In this study, the prison counselling team was a key mediating factor in counsellors’ ability to manage organisational tensions and the impact of competing roles and conflicting cultural norms.

Except for four participants who worked as sole practitioners at four different prison sites, most participants worked as part of a team. When the culture within the team was perceived as positive, which was the case for most people, it was a place of safe belonging, reflection and learning, and served as an important protective mechanism. In other teams, however, it appeared that inter and/or intradisciplinary conflict had a significant impact on counsellors’ sense of professional identity and sense of ‘fit’ within the counselling service and prison system.

5.3.1 Positive Team Relations

Working with a team of professional peers who shared similar values and beliefs about helping others was perceived as a positive experience. It was an opportunity to debrief with people who understood the complexities of the role, as indicated by phrases such as ‘colleagues who understand what you’re going through’ and ‘You can come in and bitch about a client, you can vent and people will listen to you’. When reflecting on the benefits of working in a team, Counsellor 10 articulated the consensus view:

Because you are working in a team, you are able to de-stress, you’re able to share the workload as well which has been incredible … usually in my psychologist role you would work quite independently. So, I’ve really enjoyed working with such a big team. The team support and the team culture has been instrumental to why I’ve stayed at [prison x] for so long.

Peers were perceived as a valuable resource in terms of developing knowledge and skills, particularly for counsellors who were relatively new to the role. This finding aligns with Brearley’s (1995) point that relations with colleagues can be invaluable for providing ‘counselling insights’ (p. 13). Williams (1996) also identified the benefits of helping professionals being able to discuss individual cases with co-workers.
For Counsellor 2, who was new to both counselling and prison work, her colleagues provided professional guidance and support and acted as mentors when she felt uncertain in the counselling role:

I’m really, really blessed at [prison x] … I would say that the people I work with if anything just inspire me and encourage me and they’re very supportive—I feel there’s never been judgement if I’ve gone and cried and said I don’t know what I’m doing and help me … I’m so thankful, particularly at the point of my career where I am very relatively new.

In general, participants reported looking forward to seeing their colleagues at work, and as in many other organisations, some also socialised with colleagues outside of work, either individually or as a team. Counsellor 35’s comments reflected the general view of most participants that the counselling team provided a place of belonging:

I really look forward to walking in that space there and seeing my colleagues. I feel there’s a really nice supportive culture and we’re warm to one another and there’s a good dose of humour and we muck about. It’s a bit like a playground.

5.3.1.1. Humour as an Outlet within the Team

Humour and laughter with colleagues was also identified as a positive outlet and a means of managing the emotional demands of the role. The use of humour within the team, described most commonly as ‘black humour’, ‘quite dark’, and ‘touching on the ridiculous’, helped counsellors maintain their commitment to the work and served as a container for individual and team anxiety. When reflecting on the team culture within one particular prison, Counsellor 13 identified humour as an important component of the team debriefing process and a means of dealing with what she referred to as ‘emotional spillage’:

Sometimes you need to spill and so again we’re very good in our team of providing that opportunity for people to debrief, and in a safe way. We have our sessions where we just, the humour gets very black, and it’s another form of spillage, but it becomes very humorous and we end up being hysterical but in a funny way over it so we’re very loud sometimes.

The above descriptions also correspond with the corrections literature, which identifies this type of humour as a strategy for dealing with the physical and emotional demands of working as a counsellor in a prison environment (Elliott & Schrink, 2009; Smith, 2005; Williams, 1996). Further, as Elliott and Schrink (2009) observed, it is a means of distancing oneself from ‘shocking, disgusting, or dangerous situations’ (p. 39).
While the use of humour added to the sense of immediate safety and belongingness for some counsellors, it was not universally perceived as a positive. Others described the need for caution when using humour in certain circumstances and were mindful of using it as a form of avoidance when taboo subjects and distasteful topics were discussed among counsellors. One new inexperienced counsellor expressed concern over what he perceived as the inappropriate use of humour within some counselling teams related to stereotyping and discriminatory language regarding prisoners.

I think some of the counsellors also appropriately or inappropriately, I don’t know, but they tend to take a very jokey and a very light-hearted approach to it as a means of overcompensating for anxiety. Oh, it’s funny, let’s joke about the guy who wants to commit … oh he’s saying he wants to kill himself again, ha-ha. So, sometimes it comes out inappropriately. I personally I think that’s not the right way. It’s inappropriate. I mean, I can understand officers doing it, but us counsellors, no, that’s not our job. And that detracts from our ability to do our work, of being objective. So, being able to debrief in appropriate ways I think is very important. (Counsellor 24)

Thompson (2012) has also noted that the use of humour can be counterproductive at times, commenting that the use of jokes and making light of ‘things’ that are otherwise immensely painful can, if not recognised, be a culturally acceptable way of keeping ‘things’ on the surface so that nothing effectively has to change. He also argued that because humour is often construed as a worthy attribute, its use may act as a subtle form of discrimination that influences individuals in negative ways.

5.3.1.2. Working as a Sole Practitioner

For sole practitioners, of which there were four, there was no sense of professional collectiveness. Three of the four participants (two in metropolitan prisons, the other regionally based), identified feeling isolated at times, with no-one with whom to debrief or consult regarding clients or to help diffuse any tensions related to working within a prison environment. In addition, they had no-one with whom to share the workload, which was often heavy. Counsellor 8 pointed out that counsellors often faced a backlog of work when returning from annual or personal leave, a situation that he described as stressful:

When I was just by myself, if I had a day off or sick or anything like that, there was no-one else, and when you’d get back to the PrCS however, days later you got back to, or the next day you’d dread turning on the computer and opening up the PrCS [list] and seeing all these asterisks and thinking ‘Errgh’.
One of the sole practitioners with experience of working alone and as part of a counselling team, confirmed earlier comments about the benefits of working in a team. Being part of a team served as a buffer against workplace stress and the problems associated with isolation. When reflecting on his experience, Counsellor 35 described a situation in which he had to provide holiday relief for a sole practitioner at a prison site:

I had a dreadful experience. Just the professional isolation had such an impact where I was facing the same music as I basically do here but I had no-one to talk to, at least no-one to talk to in terms of what it was like to fulfil that role and I thought oh my God, whoever’s been filling that role here, what do they do to cope and to not burn out, who do they turn to?

Despite the acknowledged benefits of working in a team, one experienced counsellor expressed concern about what she perceived as a lack of collective identity for prison counsellors across prison settings. She believed this limited their potency within the prison system:

We’re not very vocal as a group because we’re really … I think we’re at the ground level. So, we’re really focused on what we do at that level, that we’re not sort of looking at where’s the direction of the service that we’re providing. So, and in many ways, it’s … I don’t get a sense that we’re self-determining in that, that will be imposed on us and that we will be made to fit or that we would have to fit a direction that we’re not necessarily informed or consulted or talked about. (Counsellor 10)

5.3.1.3. Professional Divisions within and between Disciplines

Although relationships within the counselling teams were described as mostly positive, some interdisciplinary (i.e., social work/psychology) and, in some cases, intradisciplinary discord had been experienced by a third of participants. The interdisciplinary conflict identified reflects the fact that the two professions represent subcultures in themselves and views may not always align. Both Brearley (1995) and Morrison (1990) have identified the potential for discord within teams. Morrison commented that people sometimes assume that being in the helping professions means being a team player and being supportive of each other, but that people may sometimes struggle to achieve this objective.

Five participants spoke of times when the dynamic within the counselling team had been problematic. Although only a minority, their comments are significant in that it was reported to have caused those directly affected by it considerable anxiety. Terms such as ‘horrible’, ‘awful’, ‘difficult’, ‘damaging’ and ‘it’s been toxic’ were used to
describe these situations. In one unidisciplinary team, the conflict was said to have lasted more than 18 months and included practitioners questioning others’ techniques and practices, summed up by Counsellor 27 as ‘a period where I didn’t want to be there’.

However, in some cases, participants’ perceptions of the other discipline seemed limited and highlighted the cultural differences between the two (‘I think [they] come from a different place or a different philosophy’ and ‘They have a different way of working’). Some social workers described psychology as preferring a ‘medical model’ approach and psychologists as primarily engaged in psychometric testing, whereas some psychologists perceived social work as having a more practical role and as providing welfare support. The latter discipline was described in broad terms by one psychologist as ‘finding things in the community and doing all that’.

Some comments were suggestive of an element of ‘professional stereotyping’ (Brearley, 1995, p. 23), as the following psychologist’s comment suggests:

   He [prisoner] wanted somebody to support him, so really, he needs a social worker, he doesn’t need a psychologist. (Counsellor 31)

Others had a more derogatory view. For example, when commenting on her liking for helping people, one psychologist added, ‘I don’t mean that in a sickly warm fuzzy social-work way’.

The work of Beckett (2006) is relevant here. He suggested that staff who come from different professions and are required to work together should be encouraged to remain open to different forms of practice to avoid becoming limited in their views. In this study, some participants indicated that they felt congruent in terms of their located role and profession and appeared open to professional differences. These workers did not discriminate between the two disciplines, a perception described by Counsellor 11, who stated, ‘We meld quite well in the team and we’re all working for a common cause’. Counsellor 6 perceived the differences in professional focus and purpose between the two disciplines as narrowing over time, a change that she attributed in part to people’s professional experience and length of service in the prison system: ‘It’s probably more experience that’s been the tell-tale’. In addition, Counsellor 4, who had experience as a sole practitioner and in a team, considered working with a mix of both professions in a
team as extremely advantageous: ‘To work with a whole team of psychologists and social workers is dreams, it’s absolute dreams’.

5.4 Connection with Offender Services Management: Impact of Structure

Offender Services Management is the governing body that technically oversees the Prison Counselling Service and is based at the Department’s head office. It is distinct from prison/custodial management, which is prison based. Its overarching responsibility is the development and provision of services and programs that facilitate the rehabilitation of offenders. In terms of Thompson’s model, it is the interface between the Structural and Cultural levels within the prison system. Although its relationship with the Prison Counselling Service is mostly indirect, it is significant in terms of counsellors’ sense of connection (or not) with the system and prison culture. The findings indicated that most participants regarded Offender Services Management as an invisible entity, primarily because it was based off site. As a result, opportunities for direct communication were limited and support for the Prison Counselling Service minimal.

The issue of off-site management and associated problems appeared to be a concern for counsellors based at regional prison locations and compounded their sense of geographical isolation, an issue also identified in the previous chapter. Although a minority described the relationship with their off-site manager as generally positive, their relationship with Offender Services Management was evidently not. Counsellors commented that they were often left to ‘figure things out’ without management support, a situation that was not regarded as ideal. Two regional prison-based counsellors stated:

\[15\] At the commencement of this research, the Prison Counselling Service was part of the Offender Services Division under the Offender Management & Professional Development Directorate (DCS, 2006). It has subsequently changed, and the service is currently part of the Psychological Assessment Counselling and Support Directorate within the Adult Justice Services Division (Hankins, 2016).
There’s so many [managers] that only work part time, so that like if you have a problem on a Thursday, none of those people work on Thursday or Friday—and that makes it more difficult. (Counsellor 1)

Just the sheer distance means that often small things we end up managing as a team, where if your manager was on site, that would be something that she’d be doing. I don’t think it’s any reflection on her, I think it’s just a systemic thing of not having a manager on the site. (Counsellor 5)

The absence of any designated authority on site to advocate and make decisions on behalf of the counselling service in general had also created a system of ‘dual management’ by custodial and Offender Services Management. Consequently, counsellors frequently had to liaise with two different lines of authority when decisions needed to be made; this was often a source of frustration. One regional prison-based participant reported, ‘First they [prison management] have to call management in Perth to get back to me, and blah, blah blah’.

The view of a minority group of mostly experienced participants was that counsellors had to accept some of the limitations associated with working within this system, including what Counsellor 18 described as ‘the tyranny of distance’. However, most participants’ responses suggested that as a subculture within the prison, the Prison Counselling Service was affected by management’s structure within the organisation, and with the recurring theme of off-site management identified as one of the ‘biggest difficulties’. Counsellor 5 noted:

I think also having that almost like dual management, so although our line management very much goes to Offender Services, we are also accountable to the prison management to some extent. And so, trying to negotiate say if there’s an issue with the counselling room for PrCS, that has to be negotiated through two lines, not just through our management. It has to also be negotiated through the prison management. So, from that point of view, I guess that’s one thing that can make things more tricky.

Problems related to dual management have also been identified in a recent study of the WA public prison system, which identified significant uncertainty about ‘roles and responsibilities, particularly between the head office of the Department and prison Superintendents’ (ERA, 2015, p. 63).

5.4.1 Lack of Communication and Consultation

Concerns regarding the lack of communication and consultation by Offender Services Management, and its perceived preference for a top-down approach in decision-making,
were also frequently raised. This was interpreted to mean that as a professional body, counsellors’ opinions and input were not valued by management. Consequently, counsellors regarded their professional power and status within the organisation as diminished, with prison counsellors feeling that they were ‘the people on the ground doing the hard work’ and basically just ‘foot soldiers’. For Counsellor 30, the lack of consultation by management with people at the frontline confirmed his perception that as a subculture, the Prison Counselling Service was not valued within the prison system:

Decisions are made so remotely to the people working out here in the trenches, that’s the feeling. You talk to anyone; they just don’t get what we do. They come up with these harebrained schemes and ideas and initiatives and they say oh okay, here it comes, here’s the new you-beaut flagship for Offender Services and they roll it out and we’re like ‘Fucking what?’ Did you bozos even think to ask us about this? Or no … what do I know? I just work here.

Several authors have also commented on the failure of organisations to capitalise on the knowledge and skills of staff due to communication issues (e.g., Gorman, O’Byrne, & Parton, 2006; Kemshall, 1998; Senior & Loades, 2008; Williams, 1996). The latter author referred to ‘the prison service bureaucracy’ as one that has ‘neglected to use its own staff’s existing expertise sufficiently’ (p. 21).

Previously discussed concerns regarding communication, ‘top-down’ approach, lack of support and perceptions of not being valued, appeared to be more pronounced for those working at regional sites. Although identifying a strong sense of belonging within his immediate prison culture, Counsellor 20 outlined some of these difficulties:

It’s really isolating—you’re working within a team here at the prison but your direct line management, people that you’re actually supposed to be impressing, you’re not impressing. You’re spending all your energy trying to impress in your local prison and you’re doing a good job at that, and everyone’s happy with you and thinks you’re great and everything. But the people who are going to say whether you can keep your job or not or promote you or fire you or whatever, are based in [Perth] and it’s just disjointed and you don’t have much contact. Because you’re doing it over the phone or by email, you don’t have that human face to kind of come in and kind of say ‘Look I’m really struggling with this and we need to work this out somehow’. It doesn’t come across as just looking for help as it does in face-to-face, it comes like ‘Oh what do these regions want now? Well tell them to do this’.

Three other regionally based participants described experiences with Offender Services Management related to communication that had been stressful for them. Two of the
three expressed frustration over situations that they perceived as conflicting instructions due to lack of consistency in communication:

It’s difficult because there are so many people with their own agendas sort of saying can you do this, can you do that, you should do this, you should do that and you think Hey, hang on … so sometimes that makes it difficult.

(Counsellor 1)

5.4.2 Conflicting/Competing Imperatives

Counsellors’ dissatisfaction with Offender Services Management was compounded by the perception that these managers were more focused on the business side of the operation than on the people working in a remedial role. Consequently, the managers were perceived as ‘disconnected’ (Counsellor 5), and as having lost touch with the realities of clinical practice at the frontline and of the sensitive and complex nature of the prison counselling role, despite some having had previous experience as clinicians. For Counsellor 32, this perception clearly resulted in a sense of neglect and despondency:

It’s bureaucratic managers at the top who are interested in dollars and cents really. I don’t believe they really give a damn about what we’re doing, so why would they care about us if they don’t really care what we’re doing?

Cooper (2010) has also identified the potential tensions that may arise between business processes and professional value systems due to the emergence of the ‘new organisational world order’ associated with managerialism and dominance of market forces (p. 240). This author points out that the current emphasis on accountability often results in management ‘leaving front-line staff isolated in their struggle with the face-to-face task’ (p. 239) while they deal with organisational demands, such as performance, partnerships and costs. However, one experienced counsellor working in a leadership role appeared to be more accepting of the managerial focus on the ‘business’ aspects in that she recognised that the Prison Counselling Service needed to justify its existence within the prison system through appropriate auditing mechanisms and attention to financial matters:
For me it’s about being realistic. This is the way the world works, this is the way it works in a government department. We’re not going to change that. To provide the service and continue to have that meaningful ongoing counselling or whatever it is, we do have to justify that we are doing the work. So that involves keeping stats and counting KPIs [key performance indicators] and all those sorts of things. And the two don’t always fit well together. (Counsellor 5)

Overall, participants’ responses suggested that counsellors perceived Offender Services Management as unsupportive of the Prison Counselling Service, which did not imbue a sense of professional belonging or empowerment. Particularly for those working in regional locations, there was a sense that counsellors felt dictated to from above but then left to figure things out for themselves and ‘muddle’ along as best they could. In this respect, as a subculture within the prison system, the service appears to be at a disadvantage, with no-one to defend its interests. The following comments by Counsellor 32 sum up counsellors’ general dissatisfaction with management:

Offender Services, I think our management structure has failed. We don’t have the support that we need, we don’t get feedback. My belief is that PrCS are a group of people that don’t need much and we don’t ask for much, we pretty much need a computer and a desk, and pen and paper and we just need to get on and do our work and I think we do a really good job of it. But I think because of that, we get forgotten, we’re not seen as something that’s a priority and I don’t know where the fault lies in the management structure but whatever it is, whichever level it is, maybe it’s multiple levels, we just get neglected and forgotten about and then just dumped on every now and then. And then the resources that we have get taken away from us and we get told we have to do more with less and we never hear anything back so we’re constantly, I don’t like using that analogy, but really, we are like mushrooms just working in the dark and we don’t know what’s going on and so … Yeah it’s pretty dissatisfying.

5.5 Summary Comments

This chapter has explored counsellors’ experience of working within the prison culture and specifically their relationships with custodial and non-custodial staff: the personal-cultural interface. The findings revealed that the opposing ideologies of imprisonment and counselling that coexist in the prison resulted in strained relationships at times between the different subcultures, but primarily between prison counsellors and custodial staff. Custodial staff clearly held the referential power and because of this, counsellors mostly chose not to challenge the prison officer culture when, for example, they witnessed punitive treatment of prisoners or were subjected to prejudicial behaviour themselves.
Thompson (2010) summarises this point well:

At times professionals may come into conflict with their employing organisations where the culture or practices of the organisation are contrary to professional values. (p. 150)

Some participants, mostly experienced practitioners, were better able than others to manage these tensions and own their professional authority, whereas others struggled to find a sense of connection and perceived themselves as ‘outsiders’. However, there were variations between prison sites, with counsellors based at regional prisons reporting largely positive relations overall with custodial staff and a greater sense of connection than their metropolitan colleagues reported. For these counsellors, the more positive culture countered the sense of isolation and neglect experienced at the structural level, previously discussed in Chapter 4.

Regardless of their individual sense of ‘fit’, all participants were aware that they were working within a complex and difficult environment, and the extent to which they could manage that adversity depended on their immediate relationships. Most participants described their relationships with their prison counselling team peers as mostly positive. With one exception, sole practitioners experienced a sense of isolation due to not having colleagues with whom they could confer.

The relationship with Offender Services Management was perceived as unsatisfactory, primarily due to management being located off site and the perceived top-down approach, which had resulted in counsellors feeling largely unsupported. In addition, the formal distribution of responsibility was unclear and created frustration and, in some cases, confusion surrounding decision-making and accountability.
Chapter 6: Connection with Clients

Chapters 4 and 5 focused on the structural and cultural forces affecting prison counsellors’ perceptions of their role, their collegial relationships and their place within the WA prison system. Chapter 6 will foreground the central personal/professional dimension of Thompson’s theoretical model and the key interpersonal relationships at the heart of the prison counselling role. As workers embedded in this culture and structure, the chapter explores prison counsellors’ individual sense of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ in their role relationships with prisoners. It specifically examines their individual understandings of their practice approaches and desired outcomes, particularly the factors impacting on their capacity to establish (or not) a working relationship with a prisoner and the criteria they apply for evaluating the effectiveness of their interventions. In this sense, therefore, the chapter goes beyond the interpersonal domain in considering the broader context and purpose for the Prison Counselling Service.

6.1 The Role of the Counsellor in the Exchange

The counsellor represents just one part of a dyadic relationship with the client, albeit one within the prison context, in which the power differential is inevitably weighted towards the practitioner (Polizzi & Draper, 2013). As discussed in Chapter 2, a relationship built on openness and trust is critical to counsellors being able to work effectively with their clients. It also requires the implementation of an approach that is appropriate to the latter’s needs and circumstances.

6.1.1 Practice Approach

The therapeutic and counselling traditions of social work and psychology provide prison counsellors with a choice of ‘heterogeneous knowledges’ (Healy, 2014, p. 64) and expertise from which to borrow and apply, with the assurance that the methods have been utilised in a diverse range of settings and with a wide selection of clients. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, some authors contend that there are numerous problems applying counselling theories to practice in a prison setting because of ‘the unique behaviour context of the prison and the inmates within it’ (Scharf et al., 1983, p. 39). Both these issues correspond with the findings of this study.
While the degree of fluency with which participants could analyse their role relationships with prisoners varied, three broad perspectives on practice approaches emerged from counsellors’ reflections: theoretical, intuitive/theoretical and based on life experience. These perspectives were evident across both practice disciplines (social work and psychology) and all prison sites.

A quarter of participants worked from a clear theoretical basis, an approach that is also advocated within the counselling literature and which emphasises the importance of theory to ensure practice is not based on guesswork or random chance (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2002; Taylor, 2006; Thompson, 2010). Some of these counsellors had direct experience working in therapeutic counselling relationships with clients prior to joining the Department. Others gained this experience through their time in the Prison Counselling Service, having been based at prisons where opportunities for longer-term work with prisoners were possible (e.g., minimum-security prisons). Counsellor 15, who had extensive counselling experience prior to joining Corrective Services, was a strong proponent of a theoretical-based approach to practice:

> You do have to come from an informed theoretical base at some level, not just for the theoretical information for yourself, but [because] you need people’s belief that you’ve had that background ... you can’t be just somebody’s friend and do the same sort of stuff.

These counsellors could be further differentiated into those who espoused a particular practice framework, predominantly the psychodynamic/therapeutic tradition, with its emphasis on exploring prisoners’ past and developmental stages, and those who reported an ‘eclectic’ approach to counselling, which incorporated a mixture of therapies:

> I’m quite eclectic, I’ll do whatever I see needs to be done in that session, so we’re trained a lot in CBT and solution focus therapy, which I’ll flick in and out of if I need to. (Counsellor 27)

A second group of counsellors described an approach to practice that incorporated both intuitive and theoretical elements. Having initially identified intuition and instinct as informing their practice approach, (‘I think it’s a lot of intuition on the counsellor’s side’ and ‘I normally try and get a “sense” of a person as they walk in’), upon reflection some were able to articulate the processes involved in greater detail. Counsellor 9 described her development as a clinician as a process that began with an intuitive
approach to counselling prisoners and was subsequently enhanced by theoretical insight:

So, when I heard ‘No, you can’t go on your gut [feeling]’, that to me was foreign, and then I realised that there’s a whole body of dynamic risk, static risk factors that I thought, shit I better get into this stuff and then I could again put labels to what I was doing on a gut. So, it just helped me improve on what I was doing.

This response is consistent with the views of several authors who argue that a worker’s initial intuitive perception of a client is empowered by the counsellor’s capacity to theorise and articulate the complexity of his or her way of acting (Adams et al., 2002; Ekstein, 1969; Kroll, 2010; Munro, 2002).

In contrast to their colleagues who worked partly or wholly from a theoretical framework, three counsellors favoured a practice approach based on ‘common sense’ and life experience, and were less inclined towards one that they perceived as too formulaic. Counsellor 31, who was new to counselling and prison work, was sceptical of what she perceived as orthodox approaches to practice and of providing stereotypical responses during counselling sessions with prisoners. She attempted to differentiate between a more mechanical and relationship-based approach:

I don’t just sit there and grunt and snort in the appropriate places, I try and do the reflective listening but not in a condescending way and not just ‘Oh, that must’ve been ... or how did that make you feel?’ I don’t give them the clichéd responses that perhaps would sit well in a theoretical counselling model ... I think it’s all about showing complete interest in what it is that they have to say and supporting them in that. I don’t know how else to explain it.

6.1.2 Expectations and Goals

While participants had different expectations of and approaches to their work with prisoners, most shared the generalised notion of ‘helping’ as a key element of their practice. Three broad variations of helping were identified:

- an adjustment focus on helping prisoners in the ‘here and now’, in terms of problem solving and managing emotional and practical issues associated with their clients’ adjustment to imprisonment
- a reintegrative future focus on helping prisoners reintegrate into society
- a more holistic view of helping in which the quality of the relationship between the counsellor and the prisoner is the primary focus.
Counsellors whose focus was on the immediacy of prisoners’ situations described their attempts to help prisoners manage the emotional turmoil of being imprisoned and assist them with their immediate problems. A common term and description used was ‘fixing’ minor issues and implementing simple strategies to help prisoners cope:

I came up with different strategies trying to help him cope with what was happening. I asked the officers, could he have a cigarette, just any practical thing I could do for him. (Counsellor 3)

To me, if there’s a problem you try and fix the problem. It’s not about fixing the person, it’s fixing the problem to then empower the person. (Counsellor 31)

Participants with this ‘here and now’ focus also tried to make counselling sessions as meaningful as possible for prisoners, so that they felt validated and left the session feeling better than when they arrived. For some, this was achieved simply by listening and allowing prisoners to tell their story at their own pace. For others, it was implementing strategies aimed at teaching prisoners how to manage their emotions when becoming distressed, or educating prisoners on ways to manage interpersonal dynamics within the prison (e.g., situations of provocation and conflict with other prisoners, or when officers allegedly goaded prisoners for ‘the fun of it’). By helping prisoners slow down and reflect on their lives and behavioural responses, it was hoped that these attributes and newly acquired insights might translate into life post-release:

Helping them to understand and be aware of their responses and their triggers often is more than some of these guys have ever learnt. (Counsellor 26)

However, four counsellors were wary of inadvertently fostering prisoner helplessness through the interaction. Counsellor 35 was mindful of the dangers of ‘rescuing’ prisoners and was adamant that ‘fixing’ a client rather than enabling them was counter to his sense of self as a professional worker:

The work that I do, it’s not about me fixing someone else, and I can’t fix them. My role is to facilitate for these people to achieve something for themselves or to have a different experience. Trying harder than the client is pretty pointless for starters because then you’re simply replicating a sort of a welfare model that believes that we have to provide or do something or fix things for people who are in an unfortunate situation. I do not believe in that whatsoever.

Preparing prisoners for reintegration into society was identified as a key aspiration by several counsellors. To achieve this end, they encouraged prisoners to develop skills
while in prison by enrolling in education or securing a job in the prison industries or prison unit, and connecting prisoners with outside agencies in preparation for their release. They also described their attempts to address prisoners’ mindset through the achievement of ‘small gains’ and reaching ‘small’ realistic goals to enable them to leave prison feeling they had gained something positive from the experience. Summarising the views of many colleagues, Counsellor 5 stated:

I found one of the most effective strategies of working with them is to slowly build some sense of future, so it’s not like selling them some story that they can be a billionaire and have a swimming pool, but looking at small goals and small amounts of hope that they can do something productive with their time while they’re in prison. That maybe there’s something that they can achieve out of imprisonment that they wouldn’t have done otherwise, and education and/or traineeships, those sorts of things … having some sense that the future can be different from the past, that they won’t necessarily end up back in prison or repeating those same patterns.

Three counsellors in this ‘future-focused’ group had less concrete goals for their clients, focusing instead on their desire to assist them to achieve personal growth. This was described by Counsellor 7 as assisting with a ‘shift to the next stage of their progression’, and by Counsellor 9 as an attempt ‘to bring into conscious that which is unconscious’ in prisoners. Although a minority group, it was significant in that two of the three were new to prison work, with fewer than two years’ experience in the prison counselling role. Therefore, they were possibly less cognisant of what could realistically be achieved when counselling prisoners, given the constraints of working in a criminal justice agency. Of the two, Counsellor 24 acknowledged his ‘fairly idealistic view’ yet was determined in his resolve to encourage prisoners to improve their life situation:

I want to get my clients to live a more meaningful, a more satisfying, a more fulfilling life. That’s my only agenda … If we can get a client to at least begin to consider and to think that okay, maybe things are not hunky-dory and maybe there is something that I can do to actually make my life a little bit more meaningful, to make it a little bit better, I think that’s the basic prerequisite for any sort of PrCS work.

Generally, and irrespective of participants’ preferred counselling approach or practice focus, counsellors in both the ‘here and now’ and ‘future-focused’ groups shared a common aspiration in helping prisoners manage the impact of imprisonment. In this sense, counsellors’ ‘helping’ accords with the organisational expectation of ‘helping offenders adjust to the day-to-day life of imprisonment’ as well as its rehabilitation goal
(DCS, 2009b). However, as noted in Chapter 4, not all participants construed the work that they did with prisoners as rehabilitative.

A third of participants emphasised the counsellor–prisoner exchange as their primary focus and identified the quality of the relationship as a key factor for enabling positive change in their clients:

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. (Counsellor 15)

A focus on the relationship itself as a key component of practice is also identified in the literature as an approach common to the clear majority of ‘helping’ professions (Braswell & Wells, 2014; Egan, 2010; Gorman, Gregory, Hayles, & Parton, 2006; Okun, 1997; Sun, 2013; Towl, 2006; Williams, 1996). Hamer (2006) argued that the interaction between two humans is pivotal to effective practice: ‘Not the stuff that is done, not the therapies’ (p. 12). In line with this idea, Counsellor 26 described her approach as one that prioritised the working relationship over a specific practice modality:

With offenders, definitely the therapeutic relationship. That’s the only thing, I think, that works. I think we’re taught to go either one model or the other, and at the end of the day you can use a mix of all models. [But] it’s about your connection.

However, it was significant that practitioners who focused on the quality of the counsellor–prisoner relationship were largely counsellors based at prisons where there was opportunity to provide longer-term counselling. These were primarily metropolitan prisons where practitioners worked exclusively, or frequently, in a counselling role.

Overall, the shared view of helping and specific approaches adopted by participants corresponds with research evidence (albeit research largely focused on community based offenders and treatment programs) which identifies that such methods can promote positive outcomes for offenders (e.g. Bonta & Andrews, 2017; Dowden & Andrews, 2004; Trotter, 2015).

6.1.3 External Factors Affecting Practice Approach

Several external factors, structural and cultural, also influenced the way in which counsellors could establish relationships and work with prisoners, factors which
explained to some extent the variation in participant approaches and perceptions. First was the perceived lack of practice guidance available to prison counsellors from within the organisation. Counsellors are provided with a basic induction to the WA prison system, but the organisation does not provide a detailed opportunity for those new to the role to explore the parameters and idiosyncrasies of prison counselling. Professional development training opportunities are provided at times. However, as identified in Chapter 4, staff resourcing and geographical factors result in many staff missing out on these opportunities. Counsellor 27 stated that when training opportunities did arise, workload pressures and/or a lack of relevance of the material presented frequently limited the extent to which the information or strategies provided could be implemented:

We have a lot of training for programs and we do get a couple of day workshops here and there on different therapeutic tools, but you could get that and not be able to put it into practice for six months, because of workload … And sometimes the tools aren’t really applicable to our clients.

In addition, and as discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, the absence of clear organisational parameters is compounded by the absence of correctional literature on an agreed approach for working effectively with prisoners:

There’s less literature on this because there are so many challenges to working with people, whether it be the short time we’ve got with them … there’s not a lot of guidance, there’s not a manual on how to work with prisoners on an ongoing basis or even in a short time with grief therapy, so that’s interesting. (Counsellor 4)

Second, as outlined in Chapter 2, prison counsellors have different role requirements according to prison location, whether they work with a team of counsellors or alone, and exclusively in a counselling role or in a combined role (i.e., programs, counselling, treatment assessments), the prisoner population and prison security classification. Moreover, in many prisons the ‘counselling’ component of the role tends to involve mostly brief interactions with prisoners (e.g., as little as 15 minutes at times) rather than longer-term counselling, an issue also identified in Chapter 4. This is largely due to the organisational requirement that risk assessment and short-term crisis intervention are prioritised. Thus, counsellors are constrained in terms of what they can achieve, with approaches needing to be adapted accordingly. Counsellor 4 explained that in certain time-pressured circumstances, a formulaic checklist question-and-answer style approach to risk assessment was the only feasible option:
The less time you’ve got, the more you have to go into more of a checklist interview, like if you have to rush in and you’ve only got 15 minutes. You’ve got to be able to write those notes and it becomes much more of an intellectual exercise, where this is a risk factor, this is a protective factor, let’s weigh these up. It’s not the best but if you have to you have to.

This tendency towards formulaic practice was perceived as being further compounded by the organisation’s preoccupation with outcomes and measurable factors, such as the number of prisoner referrals and risk assessments completed. These circumstances required counsellors to make practice judgements for themselves, at times without immediate access to advice from colleagues. This was anxiety provoking for some. Counsellor 23 described a situation when, as an inexperienced sole counsellor in a prison and uncertain how best to assist a prisoner, her only option was to telephone colleagues at other prison sites for advice:

I [was] so green, what else was I supposed to do … I couldn’t talk to anybody. No-one was around. I couldn’t contact any … well, I was going from one to the other … I sort of ring, I’ll try anybody. If I can’t get them, I [phone] the next one.

The third external factor that affects counsellors’ role relationships with prisoners was their concurrent membership of two, sometimes conflicting, cultural ‘identity systems’: the prison service and their professional community of practice (i.e., as either a psychologist or social worker). To varying degrees, participants were challenged by the amount of congruence between their professional codes, practice guidelines, organisational policies, ethical standards and performance norms. The disjunction between professional and organisational practice imperatives noted by some participants has also been recognised by Sun (2013), who claimed that although some overlap exists between the respective codes of ethics, they are ‘also distinct from each other’ (p. 125).

Client confidentiality and ‘clinical discretion’ (Huffman, 2006, p. 326) were the primary areas of concern for participants regarding the above issue. Some counsellors were sceptical of the whole notion of confidentiality given the stringent requirements placed on them under the ‘total duty of care principle’—that is, the requirement to disclose concerns about prisoner safety and risks posed by the prisoner to the security and good order of the prison system. According to Williams (1996), there is an assumption that in bureaucratic organisations such as criminal justice agencies, a practitioner’s ‘first loyalty’ should be to the agency rather than to the interests of the prisoner (p. 106). However, some participants clearly struggled with this notion, choosing instead, in
circumstances in which a prisoner’s wellbeing and safety were in jeopardy, to ignore organisational accountabilities and protect the interests of prisoners. Counsellor 12 described being in a situation in which he needed to decide about how best to deal with an issue disclosed to him by a client:

It’s something you struggle with sometimes, like who am I working for? Is the client my focus or is DCS my focus? So, if the client tells me ‘I smoke cannabis because it helps me calm down’ … My decision was that the client’s my focus and I’m there to help them get better, function better in the system.

In his view, one of the main problems related to managing the ethical challenges that frequently arose in prison settings was the absence of clear organisational guidelines:

One of the problems … we don’t have an ethical document that says that sort of thing, who your client is, what you do in these situations. It’s left up to the individual to decide or decide through conversation, which I’m not happy about and I think we should have that kind of documentation. Something written down that says in this situation these are the ethical things to do. (Counsellor 12)

His concerns are also reflected in the literature. Several authors refer to the limited and often ambiguous nature of codes of conduct for people working in complex contexts, such as correctional institutions and mental health (e.g., Scharf et al., 1983; Shevellar & Barringham, 2016; Sun, 2013).

However, not all counsellors felt the same discomfort expressed by Counsellor 12. Approximately half, generally experienced practitioners, were very clear about their professional responsibilities within the organisation and demonstrated what Sun (2013) referred to as an ability to ‘perform a correctional role without sacrificing [their] ethical professional principles’ (p. 125). The following descriptions from two practitioners illustrate this point:

There are things that can remain confidential between the counsellor and the prisoner, or the person, but if there is something that is going to affect the particular unit that [the prisoner’s] in, his safety or someone else’s safety, or if he is making threats about people on the outside, we are duty bound to inform prison management and security. (Counsellor 18)

Within reason it’s confidential, except that if they say anything that reflects on the good order of the prison or on their safety or somebody else’s safety, you have to do something about it. (Counsellor 1)
6.1.4 Starting the Work

The first contact with a client in a counselling situation is identified by some authors as foundational to the development of a positive working relationship, as it sets the tone for the quality of the relationship and the development of trust (Kroll, 2010; Masters, 1994; Okun, 1997; Sun, 2013). Interestingly, this aspect was not mentioned as a priority by many participants, and there was a sense that contextual factors (e.g., prison regimes) and workload pressures resulted in a focus on task completion rather than the establishment of the relationship. Participants described the first meeting in several ways and with varying degrees of fluency, although it was clear that opinions were divided regarding ease of implementation.

A third of participants identified simple social formalities and gestures, such as introducing themselves and shaking the prisoners’ hands, as aiding the first meeting:

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, the counselling room, I ask them how they would like me to address them, are they happy with me using their first name. (Counsellor 31)

I introduce myself. I usually shake their hand, tell them who I am. I tell them my name, I’m Prison Counselling Service … just one of the counsellors. (Counsellor 24)

Three participants perceived the undertaking as effortless, or as Counsellor 3 described, something that came ‘naturally’ to her. Others described the process as ‘very difficult’ and ‘hard’. Some participants were less certain and stated, ‘I don’t know’, ‘It just happens’ and ‘Gosh, that’s a good question’.

A key component of getting started was to explain the counselling role to prisoners at the first meeting, and defining the parameters of the interaction in terms of what could or could not remain confidential between the counsellor and the prisoner:

The first session of any counselling is really, really important in setting the groundwork, setting the boundaries up, what they can expect from me and, well, I don’t really have any expectations of them in counselling. However, you’ve got to set yourself up as a counsellor to let them know the boundaries, what you can and can’t do, what your role entails, what it doesn’t entail. (Counsellor 22)
Many prisoners, however, were perceived as not understanding why they were even engaging with counsellors. Therefore, part of this initial interaction was explaining the reasons to prisoners:

If they’re confused about why, if it’s the first time I might try and tell them what the purpose is and that will vary—I mean sometimes it’s important to say well you’ve been put on the ARMS, this is why I’m here … and so that might be my needs or the organisation’s needs dictating but I guess it’s trying to fit the situation and achieve what you’re trying to achieve. (Counsellor 16)

Explaining the purpose and the parameters of the counselling exchange was perceived by participants as pivotal to the development of trust given the strict limitations within which the relationship was established:

Building a very small amount of trust. I won’t say that they completely trust us, but try to develop that as quickly as possible so that there is room for counselling to happen. (Counsellor 5)

Prisoners were regarded as highly mistrustful of authority figures and described as ‘astute’, ‘reading people better than most’ and ‘looking out for any discrepancy’ if they suspected insincerity from counsellors. Counsellor 8 commented:

Oh, I have no doubt that they can see you as part of the system ... with some element of suspicion and distrust, where’s this information going to go and/or what can I gain from this exchange and interaction. What’s in it for me?

In some instances, prisoners were perceived to be setting ‘little tests’ to determine whether counsellors were trustworthy people, an issue also identified in Chapter 2:

They’d drop little things in about … things that are considered, not contraband as such, but like 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 … and that’s how they’d test if I was trustworthy enough to continue coming to see me. (Counsellor 34)

To overcome the issue of mistrust, counsellor honesty and transparency were identified by several participants as crucial components of the relationship-building process. To achieve this, simple measures, such as not promising to do things for prisoners that could not be fulfilled (e.g., making an appointment to see the prisoner the next day), were often employed. Counsellor 18 expressed the view of many of her colleagues on this issue:
For me, honesty is the paramount thing with working with them, and I think you find, well certainly from my perspective, I find that, alright if you have to say no to them at least they know that you are not making any promises that you cannot deliver on, and that’s how you develop the relationship because then the prisoner knows that if you have said X, Y and Z, that that will happen, if they know … you’re being very frank with them.

Others were mindful of structural and cultural factors that affected the exchange and specifically the power differential that automatically exists between counsellors and prisoners by virtue of counsellors’ role within the prison system. Counsellor 4 sought to develop trust and alleviate any potential confusion or perceived suspicion among prisoners regarding custodial and non-custodial roles by educating prisoners about the differences, and to counter what some authors describe as counsellors’ ‘ambiguous’ (Greenwood, 2001) or ‘crossover’ (Scharf et al., 1983) role. Her comments further highlight the inherent challenges facing counsellors when trying to perform a remedial role within a setting where the dual responsibilities of regulation and rehabilitation coexist, and with a prisoner population, many of whom have ‘feelings of paranoia ... feelings of distrust’ (Counsellor 4).

I’ve got to get across to this person that I am apart from the system and yet I know I’m part of it—I want that prisoner to understand that I’m different from the prison officers … to try and build that trust with that client, he’s got to realise that I’m not a prison officer.

6.2 The Other Half of the Dyad—The Prisoners

A further challenge facing prison counsellors is the diverse prisoner population with whom they are required to work. Counsellors have caseloads consisting of male and female clients from a range of nationalities and cultural backgrounds, each of whom bring diverse characteristics, motivations and perceptions to the dyadic relationship. Counsellor 18 provided a detailed description of some of the cultural groups:

A lot of Indonesian prisoners, Sri Lankan prisoners and a lot of these are the boat people. We have Lebanese, Iranian, a lot of Sudanese and people from the African countries, of course our Indigenous prisoners, obviously Chinese, Vietnamese, a few Indians, not many, so all of these bring with them our (sic) own set of challenges as to how we manage them.

Counsellors are required to accept all prisoners assigned to them. This may include prisoners charged or convicted of any number of offences, such as murder, rape and
child molestation, or prisoners with special needs, such as severe mental illness, developmental disabilities and substance abuse problems (Elliott & Schrink, 2009).

For the purposes of this discussion, six key factors are highlighted that relate to clients, who for several reasons and by varying degrees, are deemed ‘difficult to manage’ (OICS, 2014, p. 36). It is acknowledged however that the different client groups identified in this discussion do not represent the entire spectrum of prisoner presentations with which prisoner counsellors are faced on a regular basis within WA prisons.

6.2.1 Involuntary Nature of the Engagement

All prisoners are technically involuntary clients having been found guilty of a criminal offence, or accused of an alleged offence, and subsequently required to be contained in a prison. Once imprisoned, prisoners have the choice of whether to use the helping services offered by professional workers. In the WA prison service, as in many other criminal justice institutions, not all prisoners have this choice. Prisoners are referred to the Prison Counselling Service primarily by prison staff for reasons associated with prisoner risk, either risk to self through suicide or self-harm (these prisoners are automatically placed on the ARMS list) or a risk to others. Prisoner referrals also include inmates placed on punishment regimes because of misbehaviour in the prison, as well as prisoners placed on the SAMS list.

Counsellors’ ability to establish a working relationship with prisoners who did not volunteer for counselling or did not want to consult a counsellor presented participants with several professional challenges:

A lot of them really don’t want to be there and they’re there because they have to be and that can affect the quality and the nature of your assessment.

(Counsellor 26)

In addition, Counsellor 5 questioned the ethics of counselling prisoners who did not request this service, arguing that prisoners should be free to choose whether they wished to engage in counselling:

I don’t think that’s ethical but it’s not realistic either; we can’t force people to sit down and have a conversation with us if they don’t want to. And what value would it be if we did?
Prisoners perceived as disinterested or lacking motivation to engage in counselling added a further complication to the engagement process. The perceived disinterest was attributed to the entrenched criminal lifestyles of many prisoners and their views of incarceration as an intermittent part of their lives. This finding supports the assertions of several authors, who argue that for many offenders, criminal behaviour adheres to their view of what is right and wrong (Elliott & Schrink, 2009; Harris, 1991). Prison is merely a place where they experience a sense of empowerment, described by Counsellor 12 as ‘almost like a badge of honour’. Summarising the views of many colleagues, Counsellor 35 stated:

Because they themselves are often not intrinsically motivated to engage with PrCS to achieve something, it’s like that consumption attitude. There are people that quite happily tell you they’re very happy with the life that they were leading and coming to jail was just an occupational risk. And they’re determined to, as soon as they walk out, the first thing they’ll do is catch up with their mates and have a big party and just continue doing what they were doing.

In addition, some counsellors expressed frustration over prisoners perceived as manipulating the system and seeking counselling to ensure their needs were met in some functional way, such as telephone calls, medication, dental appointments, obtaining possessions in the community or for increasing their chances of parole:

I find a lot of guys in prison as well will tick the PrCS box by saying I’ve also had counselling. So, sometimes their motivation is varied. Not very often, because it’s not part of their parole thing, but I think a lot of the guys think, well, I’ll do this and just put this on my parole plan. (Counsellor 22)

Some prisoners were also perceived as maintaining a profound sense of injustice towards their sentence and as resenting their loss of freedom, but attended counselling to complain: ‘to bleat about the system’ and have ‘a big whinge fest’. Counsellor 8 provided the following perspective:

Often the interview would be probably 90 per cent ventilation often about the prisoner offloading something about the system and their experiences and their interactions with the system. So often there was a lot of expressed anger and so forth … a place for them to ventilate. I think that’s largely 80–90 per cent of most interviews. I’d say that guardedly, most interviews in the prison setting.

Counsellors’ receptiveness to their clients was further challenged when working with prisoners they perceived as manipulative, a characteristic that has also been identified in
the literature. For example, Elliott and Schrink (2009) described them as ‘masters of deceit’ (p. 26), and Masters (1994) suggested that some prisoners use ‘sophisticated and subtle control techniques’ to manipulate prison personnel (p. 63). Participants in this study used expressions such as ‘crafty’ and ‘straight out pieces of shit’ to describe such individuals, emphasising that counsellors needed to be aware that ‘we get tricked or we get conned’ and that ‘people try and use you up’. Counsellor 30 provided an example of being manipulated by a prisoner charged of sex offending. The counsellor perceived him as mocking the counselling process, the counsellor and the victim of the offence. The prisoner’s eventual explanation for his offending was considered a fabrication by the counsellor and resulted in the counselling relationship becoming fractured:

He [prisoner] sits there and he looks up and he goes, ‘The devil made me do it’. And I did one of the most unprofessional things of my career. I said, ‘[Prisoner name], do you seriously want me to take that on board and believe that is the basis of your offence?’ … He [prisoner] put in a number of requests to see me and I said ‘I’m not seeing you. Based on what you’re telling me about why, only a man of the cloth can help you clearly. So, put in a white form [referral] to see the chaplain’.

The counsellor had berated himself for reacting to the prisoner’s story and for his inability to remain professional in his role.

6.2.2 Hostile Prisoners

The issue of counsellors’ personal safety was raised in Chapter 4 in relation to the physical environment/structure and layout of prisons. A similar concern about personal safety was identified by participants in the context of the counsellor–prisoner dyad, and specifically when counselling prisoners perceived as hostile. Half of the 36 participants spoke of feeling unsafe, threatened, ‘trapped’ or immobilised momentarily when working with volatile prisoners and this was clearly a source of anxiety for them. Counsellor 5 recounted one of her experiences:

The offender was obviously very distressed and he wanted to ring his family or someone to sort something out. And he came in and he talked to me and he was in tears and how sad his situation was and he just needs to ring his family to sort this out and all of this. And I basically referred him to all the right places and how to go about getting a phone call and everything. And then 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’. ‘That’s not my role, I can’t make phone calls on behalf of prisoners’. And he just got bigger, and his face turned red and his voice got so loud and he just yelled, and at that point I thought he was going to
hit me or attack me. He actually stormed out and that was the last I saw of him.

Of the participants who spoke openly about their experiences when engaging with hostile prisoners, the majority were female counsellors working with male prisoners. Female counsellors spoke of veiled threats and inappropriate comments made towards them during counselling sessions. Two of these counsellors reported that they had experienced a ‘critical incident’ (Trotter, 2015) and chose to terminate the session when their safety was directly threatened. Counsellor 32 described an anxiety-provoking situation in which she refused to re-engage with a prisoner convicted of murdering his partner because of inappropriate inferences made towards her during the counselling session:

The hairs on your neck go up that’s the best way to describe it when you’re talking with him, and within the first session he was going, ‘I can tell you really understand me. I really feel connected’ and then he was going, ‘Isn’t it amazing my [girlfriend’s] name was [same as yours]’. I [thought] okay, I’m never seeing you again and I let [colleague with similar name] know never to see him either.

Feeling unsafe was particularly prevalent in circumstances in which counsellors had no prior knowledge of a prisoner’s mental stability and counsellors had struggled to form a connection with the prisoner. In such circumstances, some counsellors described getting ‘a sense’ or ‘a hunch’ that their safety was at risk and chose to terminate the counselling session.

Ruch et al. (2010) commented on ‘the inhibiting effects of anxiety on [practitioners’] ability to think’ (p. 41) clearly about what is happening as potentially dangerous if not recognised. The findings indicated that participants (both male and female) with considerable experience working with prisoners, or with challenging clientele in other workplaces, were more secure in their professional role and confident in their ability ‘to implement the right action’ (Banks, 2012, p. 222) in potentially dangerous situations. These counsellors had learnt strategies for dealing effectively with client hostility without severing the working relationship. Of this group, Counsellor 10 chose a directive approach with ‘anger-fuelled’ male prisoners and, in some circumstances, terminated interviews until prisoners calmed down, on the basis that sudden outbursts of

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16 The issue of gender is acknowledged as a significant issue more generally. However, gender issues were outside the scope of this research and therefore, are not discussed in detail.
aggressive behaviour would not be socially endorsed in the community. Similarly, Counsellor 34, also an experienced practitioner, described a situation with a new counselling referral that clearly created anxiety for her in terms of the perceived threat. She trusted her judgement and managed the situation:

We get a referral, you call someone down, you start talking to them and as I started talking to him I thought, this is not good. This is really not good. There was just an instinct. He felt like at any point he could ‘go me’ for lack of a better term. He was sitting there but I thought that if I push the wrong way or if I said the wrong thing, he could leap out of his chair, and so I was very mindful in that session of trying to tie it up very quickly. There was just that undercurrent of hostility, of anger, but also what could be turned quite quickly, because I didn’t know a lot about him in terms of his psychiatric status ... I made a conscious decision ... whatever he said, I just accepted. There was no challenging, there was no I’m going to do anything with this, ‘Okay’, I was just very supportive and ‘That sounds very difficult for you’ and that’s what I went with until I could get him out of my room.

Counsellor 9 adopted a different approach in a potentially dangerous situation with a prisoner perceived as unpredictable, in this instance choosing to name her anxiety. By remaining connected to her emotions while holding the prisoner accountable for his behaviour, she was able to engage in a meaningful dialogue with him:

So, this character came into my office and sat down. I could see that he was okay sitting with me but he wouldn’t talk and I was scared because if I can’t engage, I don’t know what’s going on in that head, and I said, ‘you’re scaring me’ … and he looked at me and I said, ‘Do I need to be scared of you?’ and he said, ‘No’ and he smiled and his whole face … he’s like a two-year-old. He’s a big baby, it’s just beautiful and he’s from the Pilbara [regional WA] and we have ongoing problems with him and I know I’m still scared of him but I risk seeing him, and it is, it’s a risk—he could just pummel me and I’d be dead.

6.2.3 Aboriginal Prisoners

The main cultural group with whom counsellors worked across all prison settings, apart from Caucasian, was Aboriginal prisoners, an unsurprising finding given that, as identified in Chapter 2, 38 per cent of the WA prisoner population is Aboriginal. The six participants based at northern regional prisons worked predominantly with Aboriginal prisoners (over 80 per cent of their clientele) from a mixture of Aboriginal tribal groups. For those based at southern regional and metropolitan prisons, estimates were lower (22 per cent and 10.5–47 per cent of their clientele respectively).
Generally, participants reported that they enjoyed working with Aboriginal people, who were described as fun to work with (‘a really nice joking personality’ and ‘a fantastic sense of humour’). However, the findings also indicated that as counsellors trained in Western models of intervention, working with this population, particularly traditional Aboriginals, created an additional professional challenge. This was largely due to language issues, the relevance of ‘standard’ counselling techniques and the need to respect and understand various cultural norms:

[It’s] completely different—absolutely completely different—there’s a real knack to working with Indigenous and I always thought I was really good at it—probably until I went to [regional prison]. (Counsellor 19)

Regarding language, one counsellor identified English as often being the sixth or seventh language spoken by many Aboriginal prisoners. Thus, the counsellor–client relationship is complicated from the outset by a communication barrier. Counsellors across all prisons stated that they had access to an interpreter service if needed; however, the only available service in some regional settings was via telephone. Two participants described this form of communication as unsatisfactory (e.g., ‘that’s a terrible way to do an interview’) and one of the two claimed that in some circumstances, using an interpreter could impede matters further, for example, due to the difficulty in establishing an effective working relationship:

So, using interpreters, being able to build a relationship with an interpreter so that you can trust that he’s asking them the right thing. (Counsellor 19)

Accessing interpreters who spoke the same dialect or spoke it fluently was also identified as an issue and sometimes resulted in counsellors seeking the help of other inmates. In some cases, this was regarded as a more suitable option:

They’re not really like a proficient interpreter because their … 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 that comes from the same region and could speak the same tongue. You know, and the level of the interaction is much more simpler because you’re really, are you okay? Is there anything that you need? (Counsellor 35)

6.2.3.1. Working with Traditional Aboriginal Prisoners

Participants reported complications in establishing a connection with traditional Aboriginal prisoners due to language and other cultural factors. Unfamiliarity with the notion of counselling, and in some cases imprisonment, were identified as major
impediments to the engagement process (‘a foreign thing’ and ‘[They are] mystified by a white man’s prison’). Counsellor 36 sought to overcome the first issue by asking prisoners a simple introductory question: “‘Do you know what counselling is?’” So then I try to explain it for them’.

A further obstacle identified was Western individualised approaches to counselling, such as the ‘Western linear’ direct questioning approach, which were regarded as inappropriate for a population whose communication style was circular and typically involved yarning. To address this issue, Counsellor 26 favoured an approach that involved:

A lot of narrative, a lot of telling stories. Letting them, 90 per cent of the session, asking less questions. Asking not your typical white man’s way of asking questions and expecting responses. It’s more about respecting the pauses that they have and letting them tell their story. If you’re trying to find out about suicide and self-harm, it’s more in a roundabout way, rather than a direct approach. That often doesn’t work.

Others recommended slowing the relationship process down to ‘create some stillness for the conversation to happen’ (Counsellor 10) and conversing from ‘a point of ignorance, from no base knowledge’ (Counsellor 4).

Most counsellors who worked with this client group emphasised the need for cultural sensitivity and adherence to certain cultural formalities, particularly in interactions between female counsellors and traditional Aboriginal male prisoners. This included the positioning of chairs in the counselling room so counsellors were not facing clients directly, thereby avoiding direct eye contact. Some had adopted even less orthodox methods to accommodate cultural difference, such as sitting together on the floor (Counsellor 30) or walking outside rather than sitting inside the counselling room (Counsellor 26).

Counsellor 4 spoke of specifically tailoring the interaction according to the Aboriginal tribal group. Her experience of working in both metropolitan and regional prisons was clearly an advantage in terms of developing her ‘cross cultural competence’ (Egan, 2010, p. 48):

I’d automatically ask a new young offender up there [regional prison], ‘Have you been through cultural law yet?’ And even as a white woman, I learnt as time went by that I could ask certain questions. So, if they’d been through law it told me something and so the conversation would go from that. Down here
[metropolitan prison] they don’t go through law so the counselling does look different, or the rapport building looks different down here with Noongar.

However, as two regional-based participants (one male, one female) pointed out, strict adherence to practice guidelines around culture were not always appropriate or necessary, as illustrated by the following example related to eye contact:

One of the funny, the earliest experiences I had; I was very aware of eye contact. One session I wasn’t looking him [Aboriginal prisoner] in the eyes and he got really upset and he said ‘What’s wrong with me, why aren’t you looking at me?’ (Counsellor 8)

In addition, one participant who worked in a combined role spoke of her frustration about the lack of appropriate intervention options available for Aboriginal prisoners:

There are times when I feel a bit disheartened as well, especially when I do the treatment assessments ... at times when I’ve got to put an Indigenous offender in a program which I don’t believe is the right program for him. Purely because he’s Indigenous I’m putting him in this program, but that’s not what he needs. He needs another program. (Counsellor 25)

It was clear from the responses that counsellors needed ‘highly flexible and creative skills’ (Mazza, 2008, p. 252) when working with this client group to ensure, as Corey (2005) pointed out, that clients are not forced to fit a mould that is inappropriate for their cultural background, a view that is also reflected in Counsellor 5’s comment:

I think it’s just generally being responsive in counselling approaches and recognising perhaps not everyone has the same worldview or the same way of thinking about things. And not everyone responds really well to talking based therapies.

6.2.4 Male and Female Prisoners

Working with male and female prisoners presented counsellors with different challenges, most notably when working with women. Views varied, in part according to participants’ experience of working with both populations and whether counsellors were male or female. Of the nine participants who worked with women, seven were female counsellors based in prisons across the state.

Developing a relationship with a male prisoner was generally perceived as less complicated than it was with women, due primarily to female prisoners’ perceived ‘emotionality’, a finding supported by Masters (1994). They were described in terms
such as ‘high maintenance’, ‘not always lovely’, ‘leaky boats’, ‘aggressive’, ‘extremely volatile’ and ‘more vicious than males’. Counsellor 19’s perception was that female prisoners were more confrontational than men, and more likely to vent their anger and direct verbal abuse at counsellors during sessions:

Women just swear, they swear and they will direct it at you—because you’re the system to the females, you’re the lashing pole if you like … where men don’t do that, it’s very, very controlled.

Female prisoners were also perceived as ‘more damaged’ (Counsellor 32) than male prisoners. This difference was attributed to the elevated levels of trauma and multiple problems typically associated with female prisoners, a view that is supported in the literature (e.g., Allen, 2000; Carless, 2006; Elliott & Schrink, 2009; Mahoney & Daniel, 2006; Masters, 1994). Counsellor 19 provided an example:

Sitting with a woman who is wailing and absolutely devastated because of the loss of her children—whether that’s because she just came into custody or whether that’s because she can’t go to [pre-release prison] and now her baby’s 12 months old and has to go out … working with women who perhaps have their baby removed from the prison because of charges.

Six participants who currently worked with both male and female prisoners also identified female prisoners as more likely to seek counselling services than men:

So, there’s about 25 women and about 300 guys, but often you’ll look at our PrCS list and it’ll be like half and half, so obviously the few women that are there are really making up for all the guys out there. (Counsellor 20)

However, not every female prisoner who attended counselling was perceived as motivated to engage or as necessarily benefiting from the experience. This was clearly a frustration for counsellors from a professional perspective, but also because many female prisoners were perceived as institutionalised and preferring the safety of a prison environment to the violence and abuse they experienced on the outside:

A lot of those women don’t engage in counselling. They won’t engage—they see no point. ‘What are you going to do for me?’ They’ve seen counsellors, their life isn’t going to change and it’s almost they accept that. So, you do what you can. (Counsellor 2)

For Counsellor 20, working with women could also be frustrating due to his perception that some issues presented by women were less urgent than those of men. As an
example, Counsellor 20 compared a woman’s report of, ‘Oh someone stole my biro’ with ‘This other guy over here whose brother and dad just died in a car crash yesterday’.

Several participants (all female) described counselling female prisoners as having a far greater emotional impact on them than when working with male prisoners. Counsellor 2, who had worked with both groups, stated:

I found working with men easier in terms of, I didn’t require the same amount of energy, the same amount of focus, I was never as exhausted after a day and I could see double the men to the women—and I think it’s that emotionality I think it’s that when you’re with a woman, she won’t just cry, she’ll wail and she’ll sob and she will look to you for comfort. Where when a man cries, it’s a cry—it’s not an emotional connection to the same degree. He doesn’t look at me to see if I’m teary or to see if I’m impacted by it. In fact, my experience was he didn’t want me to be impacted by it—he wanted me to stay neutral, to stay in my position.

Similarly, other counsellors who worked with women, either currently (9) or previously (2), described the experience of working with women as emotionally draining, ‘overwhelming’ and in Counsellor 2’s case, sometimes ‘traumatising’.

Two male counsellors also commented on the risks to their personal safety associated with working with women prisoners. Although he found counselling females mostly rewarding, Counsellor 30 described one experience of feeling threatened:

It’s the one time I felt genuinely at risk … and because I know what she’s like, incredibly violent, [I thought] ‘I’m about to be seriously injured’.

The other counsellor suggested that organisational priorities and structural constraints such as time and resource limitations impeded opportunities for longer-term exploratory counselling with women, which he regarded as often necessary:

Sometimes I think maybe with women and maybe as a man, possibly I can maybe minimise some of their issues sometimes, that might be something .... And then there might be all this other stuff underneath it, which I’m sure you could if you had the time to kind of dig and that you’d get to. But in terms of crisis management and kind of bang for your buck, I think it’s often easier just to work with the guys. (Counsellor 20)

6.2.5 ‘Special Needs’ Prisoners

Prisoners classified as ‘special needs’ presented counsellors with an additional set of challenges in terms of the interpersonal and professional skills required to establish a
working relationship. In the WA prison system, special needs prisoners are people identified as vulnerable because of mental health issues or terminal illness, and are assessed as requiring extra attention through the SAMS. In addition, some prisoners may have developmental disabilities and are considered potentially at risk from other prisoners. Elliott and Schrink (2009) described them as ‘tempting targets’ (p. 37) for physical and sexual abuse from other inmates.

Working with this prisoner population clearly created anxiety for some counsellors, particularly those new to the role and/or to counselling. Prisoners with unmanaged mental health issues were described in terms such as ‘unpredictable’, ‘quite mad’ and ‘dangerous’, and as a client group who were easily provoked. Counsellors spoke of needing to be particularly mindful of their communication style when working with this population to avoid inadvertently inciting a hostile response. On some occasions, participants requested additional support from custodial staff to ensure their personal safety:

When someone presents with an unmanaged psychiatric presentation and I’m not sure about whether they’re going to lash out at me in that room, but whenever that is, I’ll ask for a prison officer to be, not in the room, but immediately outside watching at all times. (Counsellor 4)

A small minority of participants, including two experienced counsellors, acknowledged feeling inadequately trained for the challenge of working with special needs prisoners. and spoke of essentially having to work out for themselves how best to proceed. Counsellor 8 was critical of the Department for not providing concise, practical guidelines for working with vulnerable prisoners. He believed the absence of guidelines placed prison counsellors in an ambiguous position:

It doesn’t tell us a lot about what to do in that context I don’t think. How are we supporting them? How are we monitoring?

Counsellor 35’s response indicated that despite his considerable experience in the prison counsellor role, he found working with this particular client group difficult and questioned his own professional competence:

It’s working with those sorts of clients as a group, was challenging my sense of efficacy as a therapist or as a counsellor or as a psychologist where it was

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17 Fifteen to twenty per cent of prisoners are diagnosed with mental illness compared with three per cent in the general adult population (Stevens, 2010, p. 30).
almost like I was finding myself out of depth in what do I do with these people or what is the purpose of me seeing them, what am I trying to achieve here?

Counsellor 2 expressed similar views regarding the difficulties of working with special needs prisoners but was also critical of the lack of recognition of their needs within the system. She described her experience of working with a young, female African asylum seeker who struggled with mental health issues, specifically chronic post-traumatic stress disorder:

She was hugely difficult to work with and hugely rewarding … She was in survival mode constantly … So when she sat with me she would wail … She cried because she was scared, she cried because she didn’t understand, she cried because she experienced further bullying and trauma in the prison, she was the only Sudanese woman within the community, there’s an issue between Aboriginal communities and Sudanese … She experienced a lot of bullying and discrimination from even the prisoners so her peer support was limited and the officers just didn’t understand—not matter how much we educated them on trauma and trauma responses, and her particular situation, the system doesn’t cater for that.

The corrections literature confirms that many of the issues raised above can make clinical work particularly complex, and require a wide range of professional skills (Polizzi & Draper, 2010; Williams, 1996). Stevens’s (2010) report on the prevalence of mental illness in WA prisons suggested that prison counselling staff who work with special needs prisoners could benefit from additional training.

Not all counsellors found working with this client group a source of anxiety. One experienced counsellor said she was confident in her professional ability and was able to draw on her range of clinical skills:

I have quite a few people who are on the active disability support client [list], so there is a recognised diagnosed intellectual disability. So, flexibility for this group, I’m actually finding that the verbal approach, the talking approach is not as helpful, there’s not a lot of depth to it. Memory is also poor, recall. I’ve tried some sort of art therapy in terms of drawing and that’s worked really well. (Counsellor 10)

Two participants believed their extensive medical experience, gained prior to joining the Department, had been a great advantage and helped them to feel confident when working with special needs prisoners:
I mean, I’ve seen some pretty amazing things as a nurse—and I think that kind of stress is not, somebody else might fall to pieces. I don’t, I kind of take it in my stride. (Counsellor 7)

6.2.6 The Nature of the Offence

Before concluding this discussion of client-related factors that affect the counsellor–prisoner relationship, it is notable that very few participants commented on the nature or severity of prisoners’ offences as influential. This finding can be partly explained by the fact that not all counsellors chose to read offence details or had access to the electronic resource provided through the Department: the police Statement of Material Facts (SMF). It may also be attributable to the view, as noted in Chapter 4, that discussing a prisoner’s offence during sessions was the responsibility of programs staff rather than prison counsellors. Counsellor 29 stated:

So, if a guy comes along and says, ‘Look, I really want to work on my violent offending’, it’s like, well, that’s what the programs for. Even if you’re not booked in one [program], we [PrCS] can’t take that on.

Participants who did comment on the relevance of the offence to establishing a connection with their clients expressed varied opinions. Some participants who chose to read the offence details said they had struggled at times with the content. 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:

I’m sitting there with him thinking, ‘You are my worst nightmare, man. You fucking do that to my son’. (Counsellor 30)

Others who did choose to read the police SMF argued that knowledge of a prisoner’s offence was crucial for two reasons: counsellors’ personal safety when working with prisoners accused of violent offences, and high-profile prisoners facing life sentences who were considered a suicide risk. Counsellor 10 was of the view that access to offence details was vital for assessment purposes:

There are some offences that are so high profile that you actually do need to know some of the general circumstances around it for you to be able to do a thorough assessment, because what the person has done does constitutes a very integral part of possibly their presentation or their state of being in terms of where they are.
These participants also claimed that access to this information made no difference to the counsellor–prisoner relationship, as they were able to separate the person from the offence. For Counsellor 1, this skill was perceived as vital and an ability she attributed to her extensive experience as a helping professional:

I always make sure I know exactly what their offences were and you read it and think, ‘Oh shit’ … but you need to be aware of it because you need to know if you’re at risk from certain offenders, and the more you know about what they’ve done and their record, the more you can sort of work out, okay, I’ll just be very careful here. But when you actually see them, you separate that offence—they’re a person with a problem sitting in front of you—and I mean that’s something, I suppose because I’ve been involved with offenders for so long, I’m able to do.

Of the participants who chose not to read the SMF, the main reason given was to avoid stereotyping prisoners as ‘villains’, and the potential risk of impeding the working relationship. Counsellor 15 expressed concern that the information could ‘cloud’ his perception and interfere with his ability to remain objective: ‘I don’t want to have a perception of somebody that’s really dark and evil’. For Counsellor 7, it was more to do avoiding exposure to disturbing information:

I don’t think I need to know that, and really, it’s just filling my head with that stuff and I don’t need to do that either because some of that’s pretty heinous.

A further complication raised regarding knowledge of prisoner offences and the counsellor–prisoner relationship was in the context of working with remand prisoners, specifically when direct reference to the offence was made during counselling sessions. Although counsellors may already be aware of a remandee’s alleged offence from the police SMF, working with a prisoner who wished to talk about the offence(s) was described by Counsellor 10 as ‘tricky’ because a remandee is technically innocent until sentenced, and the prisoner may not yet have attended court. The potential legal ramifications to counsellors of being required to testify in a court of law meant that conversations between counsellors and prisoners during counselling sessions needed to be constrained. To manage this situation without hindering the relationship, this counsellor invited prisoners to describe their emotional responses at the time of the offence, but with specific details necessarily excluded from the conversation:

I sort of guide the person to say, ‘Let’s talk about the offence but I want you to talk to me about your feelings in relation to it. So, I don’t want you to give me specific details about date, time, who, the factual sort of information, I want
you to talk to me about how you feel about it, your reflections, your thoughts on it and that’s what we’ll work with’. (Counsellor 10)

Counsellors working with sentenced prisoners who were appealing their sentences were placed in a similar dilemma in terms of prisoner disclosures during counselling sessions. Counsellor 26 gave the example of a prisoner who had been sentenced to life imprisonment. Despite his conviction, the prisoner maintained his innocence:

One of the guys I’m seeing at the moment is still taking his stuff to the appeal … the High Court of Appeal saying that he didn’t do it, so that’s really hard because it’s been really very much focused on the here and now and not even thinking about what might happen in the future because he’s adamant he didn’t do it, so that’s quite awkward. (Counsellor 26)

6.3 Evaluating the Work

Despite the numerous challenges facing counsellors when endeavouring to work with prisoners, most participants could identify various indicators of what they regarded as ‘effective’ practice. In the broad sense, effective practice refers to notions of success and accomplishment when working with clients, although what constitutes ‘effective’ counselling practice in the context of a prison is not always made clear in the literature. Raynor (1996) stated, ‘Effective for what? and effective for whose purposes?’ (p. 187).

Most commonly, efficacy was based on the hope that prisoners would manage their lives better and not reoffend, an aspiration that aligns with the Department’s objectives. Counsellor 35’s comment reflects the view of most participants in this regard:

I see a positive outcome as having achieved a shift in direction that prevents the return to gaol or limits or reduces harm to others or to themselves.

When analysing counsellors’ responses, it was evident that their ability to evaluate effective practice was largely dependent on the ability to do longer-term work with prisoners. Of the various indicators of effectiveness identified, four were prevalent:

i. a positive counsellor–prisoner relationship
ii. positive changes observed in prisoners by counsellors
iii. prisoners’ self-reported positive change
iv. positive changes in prisoners observed by other staff.
6.3.1 Positive Counsellor–Prisoner Relationship

In line with the ‘here and now’ helping focus preferred by some counsellors, effective practice for some participants related not to the likelihood of avoiding recidivism, but to more immediate indicators. These included prisoners’ cordial reactions to counsellors when meeting them unexpectedly in the prison grounds, or prisoners requesting another appointment to see them:

A good job is that they return to you and that they still talk to you. I can measure that because they don’t have to, you cannot force them to talk, so if they come back, that’s a good thing to sort of measure their willingness, that they open up to you. (Counsellor 36)

In addition, positive verbal feedback received directly from prisoners suggested to counsellors that they had given prisoners something constructive to reflect upon. For Counsellor 18, her considerable experience in the role had taught her that simple social gestures and disclosures made by prisoners indicated that a positive connection and a relationship of trust had been established:

From my own experience having worked there for many years and having seen people come back a few times, and they come back to you and sort of say to you, ‘When I was outside I thought about some of those things you said’. Or the fact that they will come up to you and talk to you. I think there is a certain level of trust that they give to us which I mean you need to hold that very ... It’s a huge thing that they’re giving to you that they’re prepared to tell you things that possibly, in some instances they may not have said to anyone else.

Counsellor 34 described a situation that suggested to her that her professional counselling skills had been effective. In this example, the counsellor described her capacity to ‘join with’ a prisoner who was institutionalised and initially sceptical of counselling and professional practitioners in general:

I had one client who has been in and out of custody for the last 20-odd years and I got called up to the unit because he wasn’t happy with the cell change and had never spoken to PrCS and decided he wanted to speak to PrCS. The first words out of his mouth were, ‘I don’t see people like you’. ‘Okay. Let’s talk about that’. And so I’d made no follow-up contact because clearly we’re the people that screw with your head and do all kinds of horrible things, and two weeks later he knocked at the window and said, ‘I want to see that girl I saw two weeks ago’.
The counsellor explained that this prisoner continued counselling for two years. During that time, he disclosed the reasons for his decision to commit to the process of his own volition, which was his positive experience of the working relationship:

I actually did check with him because I was curious ... And he said, ‘Well, you listened. I’ve never had anyone listen like you did. And you seem like you actually gave a shit and that’s a rarity in prison. Most people, they treat you like a number, they see you in green and to them you’re just another person who’s in prison’. (Counsellor 34)

This counsellor’s experience accords with Thompson’s (2011) comments regarding the ‘unexpected twists [and] surprise developments’ (p. 132) that can occur in interpersonal relations. In this instance, the twist was positive: the prisoner’s decision to (re-)engage. Her perception that her work with this client had been effective is also consistent with comments by Williams (1996), who stated that when a counselling relationship is non-directive and the client demonstrates a commitment to work on his or her issues, a counsellor may feel ‘a successful piece of work’ has been achieved (p. 3).

6.3.2 Positive Change Observed in Prisoners by Counsellors

Other participants evaluated effective work in terms of the changes they observed in prisoners throughout the period of engagement. Indicators of this perceived change included prisoners coping with their imprisonment better, typically prisoners identified as at risk:

The anxiety is very high. But normally, what you would see is someone that is very anxious, very distressed, very upset, high ... feeling out of control. And then you see them at a much later point and they’re more directed, they’re more sort of reflective, they’re more accepting, they’re more calm. So, there’s been a change in their coping. (Counsellor 10)

It also included prisoners’ increased awareness of aspects of their own lives, described by Counsellor 32 as ‘light bulb moments’ and ‘the penny’s dropped’. Again, however, these observations were expressed by counsellors based at prison settings where opportunities for longer-term counselling were possible:
Occasionally when we do have the ability to do the ongoing counselling, and you can see someone work through whatever the issue is, whether it’s difficulty with coping or grief or anger or relating to their family and you can see the outcome at the end, where they’re actually reporting feeling better about that or having more success in that area, I think they’re very rewarding. (Counsellor 5)

It was also evident from participants’ comments that the indicators of success they identified tended to conform to the theoretical frameworks informing their respective practice approaches, discussed earlier in this chapter. For example, for practitioners who favoured a psychodynamic approach to counselling, indicators of positive change included prisoners acquiring insights into the nature and causes of their personality problems. This is reflected in Counsellor 35’s description of one prisoner’s sudden insight:

The most obvious sense of knowing when something positive takes place, it might be when the difficult ‘aha’ moment where a client suddenly something is illuminated or lights up for them and they suddenly see something that they ... it’s a piece of the puzzle that suddenly completes a part so that they can actually do something with that ... And when something like that happens ... I find that enormously satisfying. Of course, you can pat yourself on the back and ... not that I do but it’s a bit like okay well this may not have occurred if we hadn’t spoken about this or that.

For participants who favoured a relationship-based approach, signs of positive change in prisoners were measured in terms of developmental processes, for example, prisoners developing what was regarded as a ‘healthy’ attachment to a counsellor in the context of a respectful, professional relationship. As part of this perceived progression, Counsellor 32 commented on the way prisoners responded to the relationship termination process, such as their apparent sadness at the end of the last session:

You can see that there’s a grief there that they’re losing a relationship. Something that’s been new and different for them.

Similarly, Counsellor 26 identified the quality of the working relationship with a prisoner perceived as suicidal, as catalysing a sense of hope in the prisoner and as ‘a real turning point’ for them. Further signs of successful practice were identified as situations in which counsellors’ services were no longer required by prisoners, but in a positive sense (‘I don’t need you any more, in a nice manner, which is good’ [Counsellor 33]), or when prisoners verbalised their learning to counsellors during sessions. With respect to this last indicator, Counsellor 4 provided the following
example, which for her suggested that an effective connection and outcome had been achieved:

Usually from how the client reflects back to you in their own words, whatever it is you’re talking about, or the message you’re trying to get across. Whether you’re working in a particular structure like CBT and they actually can verbalise that link between their behaviour and their emotions and their behaviour and their thoughts, emotions and their thoughts and they can actually explain it. And then they might come back and say, ‘Yeah I didn’t get angry when this happened this week because I never thought this instead of that’.

6.3.3 Prisoners’ Self-Reported Change

For several participants, effective practice was related to prisoners’ reported ability to contain their emotions; this was in the context of potentially volatile situations within the prison in which prisoners’ ability to avoid an argument was perceived as a sign of progress. Through their dialogues with counsellors during counselling sessions, prisoners were regarded as having built emotional strength and resilience by learning to understand their emotional triggers and behavioural responses in the context of interpersonal dynamics:

[Prisoners] coming to you and telling that they're proud of themselves because there was the potential for an altercation and they actually handled it differently. And that stuff, it’s really exciting because these are guys who would normally get in there and punch the other guy’s head in. And they haven’t, they’ve actually held themselves back or they’ve given themselves time and they’ve thought about something. (Counsellor 13)

A small number of counsellors said they had occasionally ‘bumped’ into ex-prisoners in the community who provided feedback such as, ‘I’m trying to stay out of trouble, I’m listening to what you said’ (Counsellor 25). Two female participants stated that they had received cards and letters of thanks from prisoners which, for them, was an indication of successful counselling practice.

6.3.4 Positive Change in Prisoners Observed by Other Staff

For other participants, evaluating effective work was based on feedback they received from other sources. This included feedback from prison staff or external providers in the community, such as community corrections officers or chaplains who worked in crossover roles between the prison and community:
The feedback I’ve had from officers— and even one of the Father’s [chaplains] here—he said to me, ‘C7 you do a wonderful job here’. (Counsellor 7)

These sources provided participants with information on how prisoners were behaving and the changes they had made. Counsellor 14 provided an example in which her perception of positive change in a prisoner was further corroborated by staff from within the prison:

[Just] the change in him and like different staff who I don’t even know have come up and said, ‘I cannot believe the change in this young man’. Staff coming up and saying, ‘I know you’ve done some work with this guy and I think it’s fantastic’. And that’s a measure for me when I see him around the prison and he’ll stop and have a chat … That’s a reward for me.

6.3.5 The Difficulties of Determining Effectiveness

Although most participants provided examples of what they perceived as successful work with prisoners, a small number acknowledged that it was difficult to provide any evidence of positive change in prisoners. Some questioned whether they achieved anything at all (‘Am I just pissing in the ocean here?’). Another counsellor thought that there was no valid way to quantify the effectiveness of counsellors’ work:

There’s no stats that you can send to head office saying, ‘52 per cent of people reported being more happy, 32 per cent reported being more adjusted to prison, four people said that they were going to commit suicide but due to a PrCS intervention they didn’t’. We don’t know that. (Counsellor 34)

Her comments regarding the difficulty of measuring prisoner suicide prevention are supported by Grigg and Ogloff (2016), who stated, ‘No well-validated measure for assessing suicide risk in prison exists’ (p. 1).

Counsellor 35 provided a further perspective, commenting that it was difficult to evaluate any positive gains in the context of a brief counselling exchange with a prisoner because so many different staff were involved in prisoner management:

The turnover of prisoners is quite high and years ago there was some statistic floating around that the average stay for a person [at prison location] was like four weeks. So, within that four weeks, on average, there’s a lot of intervention going on at all sorts of levels and from PrCS’ point of view, you might just have a one-off, you might have a few contacts, you may only have contact while the person is on ARMS so he has to be seen, but once people kind of settle down a little bit, there may not be a reason for you to have contact with that person. So, it’s kind of hard to determine what effect your input has had on that person.
6.4 Summary Comments

Chapters 4–5 explored the structural and cultural factors that impacted on counsellors’ experience and perception of the prison system. Chapter 6 focused on the personal–professional dimension of Thompson’s framework, specifically the counsellor–prisoner working relationship. In foregrounding the interpersonal domain, the chapter discussed participants’ practice frameworks and their objectives in interactions with prisoners. It also examined the factors that impacted on their role relationships.

Practice theories and approaches varied between participants and were influenced by several factors, particularly the lack of guidance and training for the prison counselling role; the variation in counselling role responsibilities across prisons; and the conflicting cultural identity systems that created tension for some participants when endeavouring to operationalise their role.

The generalised notion of helping emerged as a common theme, with three variations of helping identified. These related to prisoner adjustment to prison, prisoner future reintegration into society, and the quality of the counsellor–prisoner relationship.

Most participants recognised the limits of what was achievable within the prison context. This was due, in part, to the fact that most counsellors had limited or no opportunities for longer-term work with prisoners. A further factor was the prisoner population itself, particularly the involuntary status of many prisoners. The high level of hostility and dysfunction frequently encountered with this client group was an additional issue. Some counsellors clearly struggled with this, while others were confident in their professional identity, having learnt to manage these stressors through their current or previous work experience.

Counsellors relied on a variety of indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of their work in the short term. Evaluation measures included feedback from colleagues or prisoners and counsellors’ own observations. Being able to assess the outcome of their intervention with any certainty however, tended to depend on whether counsellors were able to engage in ongoing counselling work with prisoners. Determining outcomes in the longer term was generally acknowledged as more difficult and created an element of frustration for some participants. An additional frustration was that success in a prison context is largely determined by recidivism rates and prisoners’ successful reintegration into society (Williams, 1996).
Significantly, despite the absence of clear guidance regarding practice outcomes and the emphasis at the broader level on reducing reoffending as an organisational objective, many counsellors had found ways of determining what they perceived as effective practice. They were clear about their professional purpose and what could be achieved in this context. This enabled them to maintain a sense of professional identity and congruence.

In the face of the challenges involved in connecting with this client group, and the tensions they experience at the structural–cultural interface, it is important to understand how counsellors ‘sustain’ themselves and remain working in a complex and difficult prison environment. This is the focus of Chapter 7.
Chapter 7: Being-in-the-Role: Self, Context, Behaviour and Connectivity

As identified in the previous three chapters, prison counsellors working within the WA prison system face structural, cultural and interpersonal challenges as a part of their role. Chapter 7 focuses on the intrapersonal domain and more intimate space of the participants themselves: their individual characteristics and sense of ‘self’ within this role and context. The notion of ‘self’ refers to the qualities and ideas a person brings to the workplace, their ‘thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions’ (Thompson, 2012, p. 33) and their ability to maintain a sense of inner balance and congruence as individuals and as professionals. Goffman (1968) was one of the first writers to identify the notion of the ‘self’ when describing the lived experience of staff and inmates in a total institution, such as a prison. Subsequent authors have claimed that the ‘use of self’ as a tool for practice is a key element when working with clients (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011; Thompson, 2015; Ward, 2010).

In discussing the intrapersonal level in this chapter, three areas are highlighted:

i. counsellors’ perceptions of how the demands of the role affected their personal and professional lives (impact on the self)

ii. the factors they identified as assisting them to manage the demands of the role (what sustains and nourishes the self)

iii. counsellors’ personal characteristics and sense of professional identity they identified as helping them to manage the demands of the role (the self they bring to the role).

7.1 Demands of the Role and Potential Impact on the Worker

As discussed in previous chapters, working as a clinician within a prison is identified as ‘complex and intimidating’ (Williams, 1996, p. 1), and particularly emotionally demanding (Flesaker & Larsen, 2010; Masters, 1994). In this study, the demands of the role had affected participants’ professional and personal lives and sense of self in several ways, positively (e.g., developing as a clinician/person, becoming more ‘worldly-wise’) but mostly negatively due to the amount of stress involved, which in some cases appeared to have resulted in near burnout. The stress and trauma experienced had also affected people’s private lives in various ways.
Working as a clinician within the prison system was described as overwhelming at times and often left counsellors feeling disillusioned and powerless. Counsellor 13’s comment summarised the views of many colleagues:

You can become quite cynical and discouraged. It’s quite discouraging sometimes when you hear of the injustices and things that you know are happening that shouldn’t happen but they do and nothing happens. And that’s at all levels, that’s at the grassroots levels with the prisoners, that’s at management levels, it’s all over the place, you’re really surrounded by it.

According to Polizzi and Draper (2010), the experiences that unfold in a prison environment can also threaten workers’ ‘sense of clinical competency and ethical courage’ (p. 24). Counsellor 23 described one such experience:

He was starting to get more and more raised and unsettled and nothing I seemed to do or say … and I thought, ‘Oh hell’. I wasn’t worried about my safety per se, I was more worried about the noise and the disruption going up the line. They’re trying to do counselling sessions and they must think I’m an idiot, I’m not able to control this man … everything in me is ringing alarm bells. My God, I’m going to be in trouble, again.

For more experienced counsellors, workplace stress was mostly associated with feelings of professional frustration and lack of personal accomplishment. They frequently described feeling powerless in their ability to affect prisoners’ lives positively. A common theme identified was a sense of getting to prisoners ‘too late’ (Counsellor 32) in terms of recidivism and breaking the offending cycle. Counsellor 10 expressed the view that many repeat offenders were perceived as institutionalised and the potential for change had passed:

There is a sense that you’ve got to them too late, that there’s been so many traumas, so many losses, so much neglect that by the time the person’s 18 and they’ve been to prison five, six, seven times, they’re repeating a cycle.

According to one counsellor, the ongoing demands of the role and sense of frustration that many experienced had resulted in a high staff-turnover rate within the counselling service:

From what I can tell, there tends to be a kind of a life span to this role of about a couple of years I’ve noticed with … just people that come and go and it doesn’t surprise me that there aren’t that many people that have actually … been working here for more than two years. (Counsellor 20)
7.1.1 Work Stress, Trauma and Burnout

Williams (1996) identified a range of stress levels experienced by workers in criminal justice settings, with ‘healthy’ stress delineated ‘at one end of a continuum’ and post-traumatic stress disorder at the other (p. 68). The stress levels experienced by participants in this study tended towards the negative end of Williams’s continuum and related primarily to secondary and vicarious trauma. Only one participant described her tendency to ‘thrive under stress’ (Counsellor 25), notably a practitioner with extensive previous experience as a helping professional in challenging environments. Most commonly, however, participants described high levels of stress from listening to and absorbing prisoners’ disturbing stories. When reflecting on her experience, Counsellor 34 stated:

I’ve often gotten to the end of that [prison] driveway and just burst into tears on several occasions with just hearing … I guess it’s that vicarious trauma.

Counsellors’ responses were generally consistent with the correctional literature, which identifies the feelings and images associated with what is observed and heard in a prison as memories that ‘stay with us for life’ (Saunders, 2001, p. 33). Further, workers are ‘plagued by mental images’ (Knox, 1996, p. 25) from the shock of hearing about serious crimes. Participant descriptions were primarily suggestive of vicarious trauma and of what Morrison (2007) defines as an inner transformation that occurs and as work that ‘gets inside you’ (p. 2). Terms used by participants to describe this experience reflected Morrison’s idea, for example a sense of being ‘psychically infected’ (Counsellor 15), of images that ‘start infusing’ (Counsellor 28) and as something that ‘sears itself in there’ (Counsellor 13). Counsellor 2’s description suggested that listening to stories of horrendous crimes had metaphorically permeated her being:

Some stories will stay with me forever—some images, as much as I’d love them to be gone, will never be gone … I’m a visual a person, so I’m seeing it and like I’m hearing it and I’ve got like a projector going on in my head, I’ll cook dinner and I’ll remember [the story] and I’ll feel, like even now I feel all tingly and think ‘Oh God’.

An additional stress was related to the negative impact and perception of blame towards the Prison Counselling Service when a death in custody occurred. One participant believed counsellors were unfairly scrutinised at such times:
I think that’s one of the things that PrCS struggle with, is the evidence of our success is invisible, but as soon as there’s a death in custody it’s immediately like we’re not doing a good job and that’s really unfair because it’s one of those things that’s unpredictable and as much as there can be interventions and management of prisoners who are at risk and you can do a good job, there’s always going to be deaths in custody that can’t be prevented. And it’s unfair to kind of saddle us with, ‘Oh, you’re doing a rotten job’ because there’s another one, and it’s a tragedy for us as well when that happens and it really rattles all of PrCS across all sites when there’s a death in custody. (Counsellor 13)

This comment aligns with the views of Allen (2000), who contended that workers primarily accountable for the care of a prisoner who dies in custody face the additional burden of justifying their actions to the authorities. Others commented on the emotional impact and possible legal repercussions on the counsellor following a death in custody. One participant described the visible effects of this stress on a fellow counsellor:

I’ve noticed there’s been times when my colleague that went to [a] coronial, he was very hesitant when he came back, after the guy had killed himself. Like really, really, really, really erring on the side of caution for a long time, for months, not trusting his decisions. (Counsellor 26)

7.1.1.1. Burnout

In correctional settings, counsellors’ constant exposure to traumatic material has been identified as leading potentially to ‘desensitisation, cynicism, disillusionment and ultimately burnout’ (Elliott & Schrink, 2009, p. 38). ‘Burnout’, in the context of this study, is interpreted to refer to a gradual process that develops due to the psychological strain of working with multiple stressors and which leads to a ‘loss of idealism, energy and purpose’ (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980, p. 14). It refers to a condition frequently associated with emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, secondary and vicarious trauma.

Approximately one third of participants described having suffered from burnout while working as a prison counsellor or identified symptoms suggestive of burnout:

I think you’re very susceptible to burnout in this role because of the type of population that you’re dealing with. It’s a high-risk population, it’s a demanding population, it’s complex, it’s a very needy, very deprived population. And I think when you’re constantly working with this one group, the risk of burnout is extremely high. (Counsellor 10)

Counsellor 34, who had worked as a helping professional across several agencies, provided a detailed description of the symptoms she associated with burnout:
It mimics depression for me. So essentially, low mood, lack of motivation to do anything, not engaged in activities I’d usually be engaged in. I tend to sleep a lot more. I start sleeping for 13 and 14 hours a night. Eating a lot more sweet foods, so comfort-eating in terms of trying to get some energy. I just see the world through a very negative, narrow view and a lot of things are personalised, so I take things very personally as opposed to being able to remain a little bit more objective. So, those for me are the signs that I’m starting to slip into burnout.

The remaining two thirds of participants acknowledged high levels of stress associated with the role but claimed they had not been burnt out. Very few felt the demands of the job affected their work performance negatively. However, five people did express explicit concern about co-workers who they perceived as burnt out, or who they thought were on the verge of burnout. This finding is supported by the literature; workers tend to recognise signs of stress and strain in others, rather than in themselves (Weinberg & Cooper, 2007; Williams, 1996). It also suggested that a state of heightened anxiety among counselling staff had become normalised in this culture. Colleagues were perceived as unable to function as effectively as they might have once, or as reluctant to admit they might need help. This is indicated by the comments, ‘They need to go [resign] for their own health and wellbeing’ (Counsellor 32), ‘She’s so tired, she can’t keep up’ (Counsellor 3) and ‘blaffing off and saying things that are inappropriate’ (Counsellor 13).

Elliott and Schrink (2009) contended that a prison counsellor’s susceptibility to burnout will be determined in part by the worker’s ability to negotiate the complex set of demands they face in a prison environment. In this study, experience may have played a role in that evidence of workplace stress and burnout among participants seemed to be associated with their level of experience as a helping professional.

Participants’ who were new to the role seemed generally less cognisant of the cumulative effect of workplace stress on their personhood than their experienced counterparts. Their stress appeared to be mostly related to ‘structural’ factors in terms of feeling anxious at times from lack of training and their preoccupation with trying to understand what it was they were supposed to be doing, rather than monitoring their own stress levels in the prison. The descriptions from three newly appointed prison counsellors who experienced considerable workplace stress when commencing the role illustrated this point: ‘[It was] a nightmare scenario’; ‘[I was] thrown in the deep end’; and ‘[I had] to learn on the job’. This issue is even more concerning in the light of
Williams’s (1996) claim that stressed criminal justice counsellors present a risk to themselves, their clients and the organisation.

In comparison, participants with extensive work experience prior to and/or since joining the Department were alert to symptoms and behaviours within themselves that were suggestive of potential burnout. Indicators included ‘moodiness’, ‘emotional fragility’ and taking on too much responsibility for prisoners’ lives, a tendency that Counsellor 34 described as ‘thinking you are that person that [prisoners] rely on’. For Counsellor 10, indicators of potential burnout and the need for caution would be when her professional integrity began to wane during her interactions with prisoners:

For myself, I’ve always thought that when I lose my empathy, when I start to lose my interest and my care and my opinions start to get really off centre and I dread coming to work, they will be indicators for me, as a time to move on.

The sense of professional frustration experienced by some counsellors related to helping prisoners manifested as disillusionment and ‘compassion fatigue’ (Counsellors 12, 35). Counsellor 28 stated, ‘It’s never ending, you never make a dent in it’. Others spoke of struggling to believe their own words of encouragement when working with prisoners whose situations seemed hopeless (e.g., prisoners sentenced to life imprisonment or prisoners returning to the community to what counsellors perceived as no opportunity). These findings are again supported by the literature in that workers who struggle to find their work meaningful are identified as more likely to become demotivated and experience a form of ‘meaning burnout’ (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011, p. 17), a condition said to potentially impede a worker’s ability to realise their full potential as a practitioner (Thompson, 2010).

For Counsellor 35, limited evidence of positive change in prisoners contributed to his decreased motivation. In addition, the organisational focus on crisis intervention, which meant limited contact time available for the exchange, was a further professional frustration:

It’s hard to really see or witness or get a glimpse of, is what I do actually worthwhile, does it make a difference? Are we simply responding to this stress—it’s like you take someone’s temperature, oh it’s a bit elevated, it’s too high, oh we yack on for a bit and then the temperature drops and then we kick him out again, we let them get on with things and then we don’t necessarily have any further contact. There’s little continuity.
7.1.1.2. Personal Strategies for Reducing Stress within the Workplace

It is noteworthy, however, that regardless of the extent of their experience, only one quarter of participants identified any strategies that they implemented within the prison environment to help counter their immediate stresses. Two participants identified reconnecting with nature and the importance of fresh air and drinking water as simple but helpful strategies after stressful interactions with prisoners. Counsellor 10’s response suggested that walking away and returning to the ‘safe space of the office’ (Smith, 2010, p. 108) allowed her to reconnect with herself, while Counsellor 22 preferred a physical outlet to remain balanced:

We have a gym at work and I make sure, mostly, when I can at lunchtime I go to the gym and really work it off.

Four counsellors said they rearranged their caseloads when they felt stressed or their tolerance was low after a ‘draining’ session. This reflects comments by Morrison (2007), who recommended that workers monitor their caseloads to minimise the risk of excessive exposure to stress. Counsellor 28 was fortunate to be located at a prison where there was greater flexibility:

If I really don’t feel good, then I don’t see people [prisoners] here. I just don’t see people. I’ve had days where I’d be at work but I won’t see anyone.

Others identified general stress prevention measures they implemented to counter the rigours of the role, such as working part time (Counsellor 32), ensuring they took annual leave (Counsellor 1) and taking a mental health day (Counsellor 13), the benefits of which are confirmed by Williams (1996), who commented that after having a break, ‘staff will return to their duties with renewed enthusiasm’ (p. 68). Counsellor 1 stated:

The fact that you know that you’ve got it [holiday] booked, even if it’s sort of six weeks away, you can carry on because it’s only six weeks and then you’re going to be off.

7.1.2 Impact of Workplace Stress on Life Outside Work

The impact of stress associated with working in a prison was identified by most participants as affecting their private lives and their perceptions of the world in general. This manifested in three main ways: disrupted sleep patterns, hypervigilance and tensions in personal relationships.
For Counsellor 28, behaviour that she perceived as uncharacteristic, such as waking up in the middle of the night to find herself eating while not fully awake, was a sign that stress was beginning to erode her private life. Similarly, Counsellor 1 identified sleep disturbance, being unable to ‘switch off’, and waking up thinking, ‘Oh shit I should have done that and what about that’. Symptoms of this kind have also been identified by Adams (2009), who argued that practitioners ‘thoughts and feelings are bound to “leak” back and forth’ between their professional and personal lives (p. 20). For Counsellor 20, the role had also had a major impact on his sleep when he first joined the service, and had resulted in frequent nightmares:

> When I first started, it was really quite traumatic for the first few months, so I was quite traumatised by the stories that I’d hear and these amazing full-on things, and these guys having done these disgusting things and just the torture and trauma that they’re going through and it’s hard not to take some of that home and I remember having kind of nightmares and it was full on.

His description is supported by the literature in the sense that short-term reactions and longer-term effects of working with clients’ traumatic experiences are identified as possibly occurring later as ‘intrusive recollections or nightmares in which clients’ accounts feature’ (Williams, 1996, p. 68). Counsellor 20 explained that for him, the initial trauma of working in a prison was followed by a process referred to in the literature as ‘normalization’ (Elliott & Schrink, 2009, p. 28), in that he had become accustomed to the content, or at least partially desensitized:

> I think that was just in the first few months but until I kind of got used to okay another day, another prisoner with another horrible story to tell. But no doubt there’s, I mean that still affects me, but I don’t feel it as much I suppose now.

Other participants identified signs of stress occurring within themselves when they became ‘hypervigilant’ in their lives outside the workplace. Counsellors with young children described feeling concerned for their own children’s safety since commencing prison work and especially since working with sex offenders and their subsequent exposure to child exploitation material. Some reported feeling suspicious of every person they saw with a child. Counsellor 28 identified feeling ‘huge anxiety’ and ‘worrying excessively’ about her children, reactions that were abnormal for her and indicative of work-related stress:
I know with my kids there’s been a number of times where my immediate thought in terms of their safety is so over the top, and I know that that’s not normal, so I’m aware of that stuff.

For others, working in a prison had impacted negatively on their sense of personal safety within the community. Three participants described feeling increasingly vulnerable in particular areas of the city: ‘I am more vigilant when I’m in Northbridge’ (Counsellor 21), ‘more paranoid’ (Counsellor 13) and ‘danger aware’ (Counsellor 30). Counsellor 2 reiterated the view that the world was perceived as a more ‘dangerous place’ since commencing prison work. Her comments were suggestive of some alteration of her sense of self in the world:

I no longer walk or run when it’s dark; I used to walk or run when it’s dark. I don’t go to an ATM if it’s dark. I’ve definitely changed. I’m more security conscious, my front door is always locked, my back doors are always locked. You are changed by it.

Williams (1996) identified increased safety concerns ‘at home and [when] going about one’s ordinary business’ as a potential consequence of correctional work (p. 68). In line with this view, Counsellor 27’s comments illustrate how working in this role had far-reaching effects on participants’ lives, and in this example had even flowed into her experience while holidaying abroad:

I’m a lot more security conscious. We travelled a couple of years ago. And I didn’t realise how much working in a prison had impacted on me, until I’d sort of walk so I could see who was behind me. And I remember [partner] saying at one stage, ‘What are you doing?’ And I said, ‘Nothing, it’s a security thing. I’m just keeping an eye out who’s behind me, that’s all’ … I make sure everything’s locked and that sort of thing.

The third theme identified concerned the impact of work stress on participants’ personal relationships, an issue again identified by Williams (1996) in relation to prison counselling work. This manifested primarily as participants’ partners commenting on their changed demeanour, most commonly when the latter arrived home from work:

She [partner] had noticed that I had changed. I was less happy, I’d been less happy … [I] kind of realised that I had been bringing a lot home with me, a lot of baggage, bad moods and I tend to get a bit more snappy, a little bit less tolerant of things. That’s a big warning sign for me because I’m normally not, I like to think that I’m normally not a snappy person. (Counsellor 11)

Counsellor 2 described being ‘grumpy’ and arguing more frequently with her partner, and others were accused by their partners of having changed in the sense of becoming
‘lazy’ (Counsellor 17) because of tiredness, or ‘more redneck’ (Counsellor 20) because of their attitudes. Counsellor 10 said her partner was concerned her view of men would become tainted from her constant exposure to men who had violated the rights of others. Counsellor 9 described the work as impacting on her personal relationships in general, specifically her partner’s concern for her personal safety:

My husband certainly senses that and says, ‘I think you should give up your job’. Sometimes he says that and also his fear that I’m working in a maximum-security prison and ‘Is she going to come home, or am I going to hear that she’s been attacked or killed or hurt?’.

Some participants, albeit a minority, indicated that they felt they had become less ‘open’ with family members and friends, due to the perceptions of their work and of feeling they had to defend themselves in this regard. To manage this discomfort, participants chose not to disclose their place of work in certain social situations or avoided talking about topics related to crime and the prison system, discussions that Counsellor 29 described as ‘not an argument you really want to get into’. Comments of this nature also suggested that some participants’ sense of pride in self and their professional identity were (to some extent) diminished by the perceived judgements of others. This was evident particularly when receiving comments such as, ‘So you’re helping paedophiles are you?’ (Counsellor 2), ‘Oh you’re going to work in a prison, why?’ (Counsellor 9) and, ‘What are you doing? Are you crazy?’ (Counsellor 27).

7.1.2.1. Change in Worldview

Several writers have commented on the negative impact on clinicians of working in a highly stressful environment in terms of changes in their views of the world (e.g., Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011; Tosone, Nuttman-Shwartz, & Stephens, 2012). Participants’ comments generally confirmed these observations. One participant described the change in her world view as a ‘loss of innocence’ in that the work had exposed her to the realities of violence, drug use and to personalities that she ‘would never have in [her] everyday life’ (Counsellor 6). Two other counsellors expressed similar views regarding their perceived loss of innocence and increased awareness of the potential dangers in society:
When I was just working in the community in an NGO [non-government organisation], I was still very trusting of the world and very naïve but now I realised that we’re all different and there are criminals in every street. (Counsellor 4)

I think I’m more aware now because of my knowledge of what they’ve done and what they’re capable of, of what you’re really up against. And they’re out there and they get out and they’re out there all the time. And a lot of them don’t change and don’t want to change. (Counsellor 13)

When reflecting on his change in worldview, Counsellor 30’s comments showed clearly that his extensive experience as a prison counsellor had tarnished his perception of human nature in general and his sense of ‘being-in-the-world’ (Thompson, 2011, p. 17).

People will never be the same to me again, because you develop a relationship with human darkness, is how I describe it. And so, I’m very aware of what can go wrong in life, what can go wrong in the world and the dangers that lurk around the corner you haven’t yet walked around. I’ve become quite fearful, quite anxious.

A general cynicism and sense of disillusionment regarding crime and the criminal justice system also emerged as a common theme. For example, Counsellor 13 described her previous belief in justice and fairness in the world as ‘a fairy tale idea’. Counsellor 10 related her sense of disillusionment to her perception that prisoners lacked a sense of atonement for their offending:

I have quite biased opinions in relation to justice. So, for example, my views on sentencing is that it is quite minimal, that the length of sentence does not necessarily compensate for the nature of the offence. My views on self-responsibility for ownership when people do crimes has been degraded. I think I began with a view that the majority of people would take responsibility and ownership for their actions. But I’ve actually found that that’s sort of gone the other way with this population because I find that to be quite rare when someone does spontaneously take ownership for what they’ve done and they’ve expressed remorse for the hurt and pain that they could have inflicted on someone versus the remorse for self in terms of loss of freedom and confinement.

Despite these mostly negative changes in participants’ worldviews, three people identified some positive aspects. Two of the three regarded their ‘loss of innocence’ as beneficial in terms of their having become more ‘worldly-wise’. The experiences were also described as an ‘eye-opener’ (Counsellors 13, 22). From listening to stories that Thompson (2010) described as lying outside ‘our own habitual ways of seeing the world’ (p. 212), counsellors thought that their levels of naïveté had diminished. When
reflecting on the positive changes she had observed in herself, Counsellor 4 recalled feeling some ‘anxiety or disillusionment’ when first starting as a counsellor and her preference for being ‘white and middle class and with [her] head in the sand’. After hearing so many diverse stories and having her personal values challenged, she felt she had gained increased understanding and tolerance for difference. These changes also aligned with her personal and professional beliefs:

I can now say after having worked with the offender population, that has I guess challenged my values, I don’t know, opened my eyes. I can probably truly say that I’m ... I’ve increased my tolerance too to what I would’ve criticised before.

7.2 Sustaining the Self: Mediating Factors

In Chapter 4 it was identified that the majority of participants had no previous desire to work with prisoners or in a prison environment prior to their engagement with the Department. Further, the primary prison counselling task (risk assessment) was regarded by most as the least satisfying aspect of the role. Despite these findings, a common theme that emerged was of a group of people who were committed to their work, had an ongoing interest in people and who, despite the challenges and stress associated with the role, had discovered that working in the prison system was something that could also be positive and rewarding. It also appeared that certain factors had altered participants’ initial perceptions of prison work and that these factors had helped to sustain them in their role, and enabled them to maintain a sense of connection with self. The latter point aligns with the ideas of Thompson (2010), who observed that people’s attitudes may change as they develop and learn and are exposed to different influences.

Participants’ descriptions revealed four main factors that had contributed to these changed perceptions of prison work and provided sustenance (three of which related specifically to participants’ relationships with other people):

i. the nature of the role and the client group
ii. supervision
iii. support from the team
iv. being able to maintain a balanced lifestyle.
Although views varied, these four factors generally countered the stress and trauma that impacted on people’s sense of personhood, and in some cases, prevented complete burnout. Notably, during discussions of this issue, only a minority of participants identified salary as one of the factors that helped to sustain them in their role.

7.2.1 Nature of the Role and the Specific Client Group

More than half the participants (21) identified working specifically with prisoners as the primary aspect of the role that sustained them. They found working with this client group intellectually stimulating and in accordance with their personal and professional values and aspirations. Terms such as ‘challenging’, ‘interesting’, ‘diverse’, ‘fascinating’, ‘intriguing’, ‘unpredictable’ and ‘never boring’ were used to describe both the client group and the work itself, despite its acknowledged demands. Probation officers in the UK have also reported enjoying many challenges of the work, describing it in terms such as ‘fast and exciting’ (Mawby & Worrall, 2013, p. 119).

When reflecting on her experience of working with a range of client groups in different agencies, Counsellor 34 expressed the view of many of her colleagues that working with prisoners was interesting and often intriguing:

> I’ve always really enjoyed offending populations. I’ve worked in child protection, I’ve worked in drugs and alcohol, but there’s something about offending populations that is … I don’t know. It’s attractive, I guess. I don’t know if that’s the right word. Stimulating, that’s probably the better word that I’m looking for. They’ve got a bit of pizzazz about them that perhaps other client groups don’t have.

The evident fulfilment counsellors derived from working with prisoners also accords with Armstrong and Griffin’s (2004) study of correctional work, which identified an association between the challenge of the work and job satisfaction.

A diverse range of perspectives were identified as to what specifically about the role and client group helped to sustain counsellors’ interest. However, four aspects were most prevalent:

i. making a difference
ii. working with the disadvantaged
iii. opportunity to develop professional skills
iv. curiosity about working with ‘deviants’.
For half of the participants, feeling they made a difference to prisoners’ lives, albeit in a small way, provided immense job satisfaction. Participants described feeling a sense of personal excitement when witnessing a prisoner’s capacity to change and to view things in an entirely new way. Although these moments were perceived as rare, they were nonetheless described as ‘wonderful’ (Counsellor 8), ‘encouraging’ (Counsellor 16) and something ‘that keeps me hooked’ (Counsellor 27). Counsellor 11’s comments reiterated the view that witnessing prisoners’ small gains was one of the most gratifying aspects of the prison counselling role:

I’m hoping that I’m making a difference to someone—that’s quite rewarding—the rewards in this job are very, again few and far between, we make little bits of progress with a select few people—every now and then you’ll make some progress and you think, ‘Ah, this is why I do this job’.

Witnessing this change was identified as occurring most frequently when working with prisoners who were perceived as genuinely motivated to engage in the counselling process. Counsellors were sometimes able to recruit prisoners initially classified as involuntary through the ARMS process and who, having established a level of trust with the counsellor during a period of crisis, had expressed a desire to continue with counselling. This opportunity mostly occurred at prison settings where opportunities for longer-term counselling were available and was identified as the most fulfilling form of interaction. For example, Counsellor 13 stated:

Clients that we come into contact through the crisis work most often, but they express a motivation and a desire to work on something for longer and we see that as a good way of doing preventative work. And I think for most of us that’s what gives us the reward and makes our job feel really worthwhile, is that preventative component, even though it’s the smaller component.

The literature also identifies the personal benefits to practitioners of a sense that they are making a positive difference to someone’s life, of ‘seeing a client progress and change, with one’s own help’ (Williams, 1996, p. 91) and providing ‘great sustenance to the self’ (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011, p. 171).

For other participants making a difference had a broader societal focus, with prevention and a sense of responsibility to the community and the victims of crime identified as benefits. Two participants within this group were clear that making a positive difference to the community was about prisoners being held accountable for their actions, based on the view that ‘crime cannot go unpunished’ (Counsellor 9). Another two counsellors
highlighted the preventative component of the work and flow-on effect to the wider community as key motivators:

Even if only sort of one per cent of those we work with have a change in their behaviour and end up not reoffending and not coming back to prison, in terms of the number of victims that that saves, both primary and secondary, for me that’s important to recognise that. While we won’t be successful with everyone, we only need to have success with a small number that actually do have a real change in a lot of people’s lives. (Counsellor 5)

If you can have an influence on the offender, in the long run you’re going to keep the community safe. So, there’s that long-term view. (Counsellor 4)

Second, a quarter of participants, across both disciplines, identified the opportunity to work with people perceived as disadvantaged as a sustaining factor and as a means of addressing workers’ professional and political aspirations related to social exclusion and social justice issues. This commitment was apparent via expressions such as ‘barrack for’, ‘champion the underdog’, ‘I hate seeing injustice’ and ‘No-one has the right to laud it over another person’. Similarly, Counsellor 4:

We usually have something about justice inside of us. Helping the most disadvantaged in society. I mean there’s not many more disadvantaged than the people we see.

The most consistently preferred population with which to work within the ‘disadvantaged’ category was Aboriginal prisoners. Working with this group was described as ‘a real privilege’, ‘incredibly rewarding’, an ‘absolute pleasure’ and ‘[It’s] an honour to be trusted’. Interestingly, similar terms were rarely, if ever, used by participants when describing their experience of working with other prisoner populations.

Third, working with prisoners was identified as stimulating from a clinical perspective, and an opportunity to develop as a professional. This was due to the wide diversity of client presentations available to counsellors in a prison that would not necessarily exist in a community-practice setting. Prison counselling was described as a ‘really specialised field’ (Counsellor 4) and one that provided a chance for counsellors to utilise a broad range of professional knowledge and skills:
You can be dealing with anxiety to someone with an eating disorder, so the spectrum is really wide. You also get exposed to the fringes of the bell curve in terms of someone’s presentation. So, it may be the case that we’ve actually been over-exposed to psychotic presentations, which you normally would not see working in a community setting. So, it’s a very dynamic, very interesting sort of population to work with. (Counsellor 10)

Others spoke of always learning and developing as professionals, a factor that clearly nourished Counsellor 2’s sense of self (‘I’m learning all the time and I love to learn. It completes my world’). Counsellor 20 reflected the general view that working with this client group was a source of immense intellectual stimulation:

From a psychologist’s point of view, it’s very, very interesting, ... especially mental health it’s very interesting clinically I think. You get to see lots of different people presenting in lots of different ways and every day is different. Every day is very interesting .... and that’s really challenging and interesting.

Other participants’ responses were consistent with the correctional literature in that having access to people who had done ‘extraordinary, deviant things and to places that are not open to people in general’ was an attraction (Williams, 1996, p. 92). Two participants described being privy to exclusive information regarding prisoners as providing valuable insights into a world largely unknown by the public: ‘I get an appreciation of what people wouldn’t know about working in here’ (Counsellor 34). Similarly, Counsellor 28 commented:

Having access to I guess a lot of people’s stories on quite an intimate level that you normally wouldn’t know about if you weren’t doing this sort of work.

Counsellor 15 provided a slightly different perspective and acknowledged a fascination with ‘the dark side’.

A significant implication of the above findings is that despite their initial reservations about working with this client group, many counsellors had managed to find a sense of meaning and professional satisfaction from their interactions with them.

### 7.2.2 Supervision

Most participants identified regular supervision as a key sustaining factor. Counsellor 30 stated:
I think really the core thing that the prison system or the Department, I should say, provides that really facilitates us doing our job is supervision. I would say that’s it. That’s their primary contribution to us doing the work that we do.

This finding is consistent with several authors who claim that organisational support through supervision is a key factor in helping employees vent, process or debrief about traumatic material and a safe space for workers to express their fears and concerns (Bell, Kulkarni, & Dalton, 2003; Morrison, 1990, 2007; Williams, 1996).

Feeling validated and supported as people, and the opportunity to debrief after sessions with ‘difficult to manage’ clients, was considered essential to counsellors’ practice and personal wellbeing. Two experienced counsellors were emphatic that they could not survive without their supervision: ‘I can’t go a fortnight without supervision, I start to get, “this is too much”’ (Counsellor 19). Counsellor 13 claimed supervision helped her to remain balanced when struggling with cultural issues within the prisons. For example, when confronted with what she perceived as unfair treatment of prisoners by custodial staff:

As soon as I find myself getting outraged or really incredibly angry to the point of spilling, something’s pushing my buttons and I need to go to supervision.

Not all participants were thought to be as enthusiastic about supervision, although reasons varied. Counsellor 16 perceived some counsellors as fearful of supervision, thinking that they could manage the role on their own, which he described as ‘crazy’. Counsellor 15, an experienced practitioner, said he had declined the Department’s offer of ‘in-house’ supervision on the basis that there was no-one in the Department with whom he felt comfortable to engage. This counsellor had chosen not to have any supervision.

Some counsellors preferred external supervision. Comments such as being able to ‘let off steam’ and ‘bitch about the Department’ (Counsellor 1) to someone outside the organisation suggested that some counsellors did not feel comfortable disclosing personal information to internal supervisory staff. This alluded to what Thompson (2009b) has referred to as ‘snoopervision’ (p. 171). Counsellor 20 confirmed this view, commenting that personal disclosures during supervision sessions could potentially come ‘back to bite’ him in his annual staff performance appraisal.
External supervision was not always found to be a satisfactory alternative. In some cases, this was due to the perceived insufficient expertise of supervisors, an issue also identified by Williams (1996). This was the experience of Counsellor 25, who said that although she was grateful to the Department for providing professional support and financing her external supervision, she had reservations regarding these arrangements:

I’ve got a supervisor who is really a good guy but he has never worked in the prison setting. I mean, I can talk to him, but it’s not quite the same.

Three participants chose to supplement their in-house supervision by engaging in personal therapy, a strategy that helped them manage the rigours of the role: ‘It’s the best thing I ever did, best move I ever made’ (Counsellor 26) and ‘through my own therapy and becoming myself more confident’ (Counsellor 34).

For some participants who relied solely on in-house supervision, this had been sporadic, between six to eight weeks. For others, when they first started, it was non-existent:

It started now and we get a group supervision which is three of us at a time, probably for one morning so 9:30 ‘til 12:00 every three months. Ridiculous isn’t it? (Counsellor 14)

This situation had created anxiety for some practitioners, due to their increasing stress associated with workload demands and their perceived ability ‘to cope’.

When I started there for a while there was nothing and I was kind of thinking this is full-on work, how are we going to cope? (Counsellor 20)

Counsellor 14, who had extensive experience in correctional settings prior to joining the Department, said that she and her colleagues were ‘crying out’ for supervision. She cited ‘the straw that breaks the camel’s back’ when she discussed burnout:

I’ve never done this type of work without having constant supervision, and it’s something that I am so desperate for.

The issues raised above are particularly concerning in that some counsellors are not being afforded the opportunity for critical analysis of their work or developing the capacity to cope with the demands of the role. In addition, Dearnley (1985) argued that agencies concerned with public safety and the safety of their workers let ‘supervision go at their peril’ (p. 55). Jones, Cooper and Ferguson (2008) take this notion a step further, arguing that lack of supervision reflects ‘a more dysfunctional’ agency’ (p. 281).
7.2.3 Support from Team

As identified in Chapter 5, for most participants the prison counselling team was a key mediating variable at the professional–cultural interface and a place of safe belonging. Most participants who worked within a team setting also identified relationships with their team colleagues as a major sustaining factor in managing the demands of their role. The team helped to balance what was perceived at times to be an oppressive and unfriendly prison environment. It was a space to debrief and share a laugh with colleagues, to feel supported and validated as people: ‘I’m fortunate to have a supportive team’ (Counsellor 34) and ‘You get support, you know, validated’ (Counsellor 12). Others said:

Within our team there’s always a set of ears for the good stuff and the bad stuff—you bounce a lot of ideas off each other—we’re a very cohesive team, so there’s always an open door somewhere. (Counsellor 11)

It’s a lot of fun, we have a lot of fun, a lot of laughs. We have our coffee after PRAG (sic) and debrief and there’s a lot of humour .. We celebrate our wins and the times when things have gone well, as much as we gnash our teeth together when they haven’t. (Counsellor 13)

In addition, four participants employed in leadership roles, either as supervisors or managers of the prison counselling teams, described their role and being able to support the team as a positive experience. For Counsellor 4, it was a personally rewarding one:

In being clinical supervisor and responsible for the quality of work of the team, it’s making use of the strengths of the team, the strength of the team as a whole, and then encouraging and providing the environment in which we’re open to what is the best practice and are we doing it. So that really sustains me.

Structural variations across prisons meant, however, that support from the team was not always available (e.g., in the case of counsellors who worked as sole practitioners, three of whom said that they struggled with feeling isolated at times).

7.2.4 Work/Non-Work Balance

A further important mediating factor enabling practitioners to sustain a sense of self was being able to maintain a balance between work and life outside of work, described by Counsellor 6 as ‘so vital in this job’. This factor was identified by more than half of the participants in the study. The need to maintain a work-life balance was attributed in part
to the perception that working in a prison was ‘unnatural’, whereas life outside the prison gates was ‘normal’ life and ‘the real world’ (Counsellor 4). Two main factors appeared to facilitate the work–non-work balance, resulting in people feeling refreshed when they returned to their professional role: not taking work home and a regular self-care regime.

Of the 36 participants, 22 said they tried to leave work at work. The correctional literature supports this finding. Not taking work home is identified as a strong protective factor in terms of burnout prevention in counsellors (Elliott & Verdeyen, 2002). Strategies mentioned include trying to clearly differentiate between work and home life, to tune into ‘a different mode’, and to ‘switch off’, ‘cut off’, ‘tune things out’ and ‘chop it off’. For Counsellor 35, this was relatively easy:

A benefit is the work stays here, it’s very contained. I can rock up and okay, right as soon as I walk in there, that’s where my work starts, but as soon as I walk out, I take nothing home.

Five people identified the drive home and the ‘physical separation of space’ from the prison as literally creating the necessary distinction between work and home, and the drive as an opportunity to debrief and ‘chill out’ (Counsellor 27). Experience appeared to be a key factor in some cases. For example, Counsellor 31 said she had learnt from ‘bitter experience’ in a previous workplace that switching off from the job was vital for remaining balanced within herself:

Once I get in the car and drive home, that is my debrief time for myself, that’s my decompression zone I call it. So, when I arrive at home or wherever, turn the car off, take the key out, that’s it, I don’t think about the day at all. I’ve learnt to do that. I can’t take it home.

Counsellor 26 also regarded her ability to separate work and home life as based on experience and feeling confident in the role:

I think you get better at it. Initially, no, it was quite hard. Maybe that comes with feeling confident about your position. I think as a beginning therapist you’re very nervous about the decisions you make and you come to work on the Monday thinking, ‘Oh God, I hope the coroner’s van’s not outside’.

For others, maintaining a work–non-work balance and a sense of connectivity was enabled by committing to a regular self-care routine, which included recreational and sporting activities, and strong family and social support networks. Telephoning family or friends for support, for example, was said to be a means to either ‘offload’
(Counsellor 6) or, conversely, to ‘talk about anything but work’ (Counsellor 2). These strategies align with the views of Howe (2008), who identified family and friends as strong protective factors against everyday stress and strain.

Counsellor 9 used recreational pursuits to help nurture herself:

Yoga and Pilates I try and do every Saturday for two hours and that calms the mind, and then ballroom dancing I do on a Sunday night and a Thursday. When my husband’s here, he surfs or we do diving, underwater diving or we swim.

There were clearly differences among participants in terms of how they managed the rigours of the role. Three counsellors stated that they never switched off completely, a tendency they attributed to loving their work and being ‘so involved’ in it. Some participants reported no form of self-care at all. For example, Counsellor 1 identified the importance of a self-care regime in theory, but said her good intentions rarely translated into practice. It is of interest, however, that of those counsellors who identified having neglected their self-care, two had worked for many years as helping professionals and appeared to have learnt through experience how to manage their work pressures. Counsellor 25 admitted, ‘There hasn’t been self-care. I can’t even lie to you’ and explained that dedication to her work and her strong work ethic took priority over her personal wellbeing. This aligned with her personal and professional values:

I’m a bit of a perfectionist, I’m a bit of a workaholic, and I’ve got an over-commitment really in terms of work wise. But, in the end, if I do it that way, I go home and I feel good about what I’ve done, and I think that in itself, makes … It’s really important to me.

In this sense, despite not having an explicit self-care regime, she clearly derived a sense of personal fulfilment and wellbeing from her work.

7.3 Personal Characteristics and Sense of Professional Identity

Having discussed some of the key stressors and external mediators identified by participants at the personal–professional interface, the next focus is the individual characteristics that counsellors brought to the role to enable deeper consideration of their ontological level of professional identity and ‘beingness-in-the-world’. This refers to aspects of a worker’s personality and disposition that are widely accepted in the therapeutic literature as influencing process and outcome in interpersonal relations (Corey, 2005; Harvey, 2011; Rogers, 1961; Thompson, 2009a). Despite a long history,
these have been mostly ignored in the correctional literature (Towl, 2006). The word ‘personality’ is broadly interpreted here to refer to the qualities (attributes) pertaining to the person rather than to what the person does. ‘Disposition’ refers to the notion of identity, or more specifically, to prison counsellors’ sense of ‘self’ within the requirements and confines of their role.

The findings revealed a range of personal attributes that participants brought to the role that appeared to underpin their work as helping professionals. These qualities helped facilitate a sense of connectedness at the personal–professional–organisational interface while enabling them to manage the demands of the role, specifically during counselling interactions with prisoners. Four dominant and often interrelated characteristics were identified, although all four were rarely present in any one person. These were: empathy, compassion and acceptance, beliefs and values, capacity for self-awareness, and resilience and optimism.

7.3.1 Empathy, Compassion and Acceptance

Participant responses were suggestive of a group of people who were compassionate by nature. This quality enabled them to accept prisoners as fellow human beings, irrespective of their criminal behaviour. This finding is consistent with the counselling literature, which identifies the basic qualities of compassion, empathy, warmth and a non-judgemental attitude as crucial for professional practice (Howe, 2008; Jones, 2012; Simmonds, 2010). Counsellor 25 stated:

I bring a lot of empathy. This sounds corny. I really care about each person that sits in front of me. I really, really care about each person.

Participants frequently commented that they found it easy to empathise when learning of prisoners’ tragic life experiences (‘They never stood a chance’ [Counsellor 25], ‘a life of horror’ [Counsellor 28] and ‘so much tragedy and trauma and neglect’ [Counsellor 26]). Counsellor 31’s comment echoed the view of many participants:

So, every day, through PrCS, I’d be sitting listening to story after story after story with this similar pattern coming through. Crap home life, crap family life and [they’re] just an extension of it and this was a no-brainer that [they’d] end up in here.

Although participants identified empathy and compassion as important qualities for professional practice, some, albeit a minority, cautioned against becoming too empathic.
Counsellor 22 thought being too compassionate, for example, could be misconstrued by prisoners as inadvertently condoning a criminal lifestyle. Counsellor 5 believed that counsellors needed to find a balance between empathy, their professional role and prisoner accountability:

[Counsellors] have to be able to be realistic about people’s lives and why they are here and that seeing that they end up here through their own choices. And although they may have had tragic things happen in their lives, that’s not the only reason they’re here.

Most commonly, participants believed that people were ‘generally good’ and deserved to be treated with respect—the same as anyone else (‘Everyone makes mistakes’ and ‘No-one is immune [from offending] given the conditions’). Counsellor 15 accepted prisoners as no different to anybody else (‘There’s good in everybody. There’s darkness in everybody’), a view also expressed by Gorman, Gregory et al. (2006) who claimed that few people are ‘wholly harmless or wholly dangerous’ (p. 81). Counsellor 20’s comment reflected a similar idea:

I’m thinking that you attribute altruistic motives to people, as in even if they are not, even if you’ve got your psychopathic person who’s just out to do everyone over you’re still attributing altruistic motives to them and you still think inside, there somewhere, there’s a poor little boy who needs help … to be able to still see the fellow human underneath all that stuff.

Counsellor 12 commented that he did not always understand why certain prisoners had offended in the way that they had. However, he was able to remain connected to his personal values regarding humans and ‘self’ by drawing on his compassionate nature when confronted with prisoners he perceived to be in distress:

So, I look at [the prisoner], he’s a person whose got everything, that person has feelings, thoughts, behaviours, history. He’s got people who love him, people he loves and he’s done this thing that’s quite shameful and quite horrible. In some cases, where they’ve killed somebody, so yes, that’s part of it, but you see them as a person. A person first and then, what does the Bible say? Hate the sin, love the sinner. So, I think that’s good advice.

Thompson (2009b) identified the quality of acceptance as a key attribute of professional practice: of a worker’s capacity to engage with someone regardless of what they have done or ‘whether or not we like them’ (p. 130). However, some prisoners clearly tested counsellors’ capacity to remain empathic and accepting. On such occasions, counsellors identified the need to implement certain strategies to ensure that they remained neutral
and connected to their professional selves. Counsellor 5 sought to identify one positive feature she liked about a prisoner, no matter how much she disliked them. Counsellor 16 focused on remaining respectful towards the prisoner when feeling personally challenged:

I think if you didn’t send out some good vibes about them, and that doesn’t mean you have to like them all, and I don’t think it has to mean you approve of their offence or anything, I mean I just couldn’t get that, but I think you need to be able to be respectful to them … and you can be respectful to people even if you don’t warm to them I suppose.

Generally, it appeared that since joining the Prison Counselling Service, participants managed to overcome any negative preconceptions they may have had about prisoners and prisons, and were able to work with ‘dangerous’ prisoners in the realisation that not all prisoners were ‘ogres’. When reflecting on her changed perspective, Counsellor 13’s comments reflected a key theme and finding of the study regarding how participants made sense of their role. Specifically, that exposure to the complexities of many prisoners’ lives had given them an understanding that this was a population in which extreme disadvantage and dysfunction were mostly the norm:

Understanding that these people are not monsters ... [I have] more of an understanding about how [prisoners] got where they got and why they did what they did … instead of it being a complete mystery that I just couldn’t get my head around.

7.3.2 Beliefs and Values

Participants brought specific personal beliefs and values to the role that enabled a sense of connectedness to self and others, with the most consistent finding related to spiritual and religious beliefs, mainly a belief in God or a ‘higher power’. Counsellor 20’s comments, for instance, indicated that his religious beliefs provided a secure foundation from which he was able to engage empathically with prisoners:

I’m a Christian, I believe in God. And I think in that there’s like a charitable kind of, love thy neighbour kind of approach to life in hoping and seeing the best in people, and even if they’re filthy disgusting criminals then that’s okay because that’s I suppose the message of Christianity, is that we’re kind of all in that state in say one way or another.

Of those participants who held strong religious or spiritual beliefs, the work was perceived by most as a vocation rather than a job. Counsellor 19 stated:
For me, it’s a real passion, this isn’t just a career, and it is almost like I’ve found a calling … so it’s a real spiritual experience for me.

Other responses revealed varying interpretations of religious and spiritual life. Three participants who subscribed to the concept of reincarnation believed that counsellors may have known colleagues or prisoners in previous lives and had chosen to (re)connect with certain people, albeit ‘subconsciously’ (Counsellor 2) in this life. Counsellor 9 indicated that her belief in destiny and a spiritual world provided her with a sense of connectivity to herself and her work, a point also noted by Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2011), who suggested that an active spiritual or religious life can help promote a practitioner’s sense of ‘personal self’ in the workplace (p. 215). One counsellor reflected:

I think that what gives me meaning is the fact that I’m not alone in this, that there’s a higher power and that I work as a team with other people who I’m meant to work with, and who I’m meant to grow with and who are meant to be here at this time together. (Counsellor 9)

Other participants’ beliefs and values were based on moral and ethical principles rather than orthodox religious views. For example, Counsellors 32 and 35 expressed an explicit interest in existential notions of what it meant to be human. Counsellor 10’s personal philosophy was guided by the Hippocratic Oath, associated with the medical profession’s pledge ‘to do no harm’. When reflecting further on the beliefs and qualities she brought to the role, Counsellor 32 identified her personal belief in goodness and caring for other people as her prime motivational focus when working with prisoners:

No religious views I’m not religious at all. My view is that you don’t need religion to be a good person, you can be a good person without believing in a God. It’s really sort of simple again, it’s about being good to others and caring about other people, that you’re not the only person and trying to understand other people.

7.3.3 Capacity for Self-Awareness

Insight into oneself is identified by Jones, Cooper and Ferguson (2008) as crucial when working with vulnerable people, as well as an awareness of how workers ‘contribute to the puzzles, tensions and complications’ experienced in the workplace (p. 281). A third of participants specifically commented on their part in the counsellor–prisoner relationship and the importance of having an awareness of self. Several interrelated categories of ‘awareness’ were identified: emotional intelligence; awareness of
intrapsychic processes; capacity for critical self-reflection; and awareness of underlying motivation.

7.3.3.1. Emotional Intelligence

Participants to whom this category applied were mindful of the impact they had on prisoners, but also of the impact prisoners had on them. These qualities are identified in the counselling literature as key aspects of professional practice and are associated with sensitivity and ‘emotional intelligence’ (e.g., Morrison, 2007; Thompson, 2011). Emotional intelligence, according to Morrison (2007), refers to a worker’s ability to monitor ‘deep level signals about information that demands attention … as to whether a situation is to be approached or avoided’ (p. 255) and using that information to guide subsequent thinking and action. Counsellor 33’s comments indicated that attending to these signals during counselling sessions was a key component of his practice, an attribute that enabled him to remain congruent and connected with his professional self:

Intuition actually can be called emotional intelligence. My intuition is that I don’t think that I should approach this [prisoner] now because it might backfire. That’s actually emotional intelligence. So, where that intuition comes from, you can’t put in an event, but the thing is that you’re able to feel that emotion within you and you’re able to see that I think I am not going to address this thing now. That itself is smart enough not to go there.

In addition, Harrison and Ruch (2007) argued that emotional sensitivity and self-awareness can help practitioners to recognise ‘when, how and why practice encounters resonate with personal experiences and trigger unexpected responses’ (p. 43). This idea was also reflected in the comments of several counsellors regarding their capacity to maintain composure despite being deeply affected by prisoner disclosures during counselling sessions. Counsellor 12 described a personally confronting interaction with a prisoner in which his ability to remain attentive while listening to the prisoner’s disturbing disclosure demonstrated emotional intelligence:

I was speaking to a guy who had abused his 12-year-old son and my son’s the same age. So, I felt, ‘Ooh’; I felt that when he was talking I thought okay, I’ve just got to put that aside and just keep going. And while I was listening I was also trying to deal with that and make sure, because for his benefit I didn’t want it to come [out], so just being careful of what I said back, I think, for him.

Counsellor 26 provided an example of how her unforeseen emotional response and subsequent use of self during a counselling session with a long-term client contributed
to a positive outcome. In showing her vulnerability to this prisoner, a positive shift was enabled:

I had this reaction and tears went down my cheek, and in my head, I was going, ‘Bad therapist, bad therapist, it’s not about you, pull it together’. And then the other part of me was going, ‘No, it’s an appropriate reaction’. And so, I was wrestling with this in my head, in the meantime trying to hold the moment. I think he [prisoner] was floored … And he came back the next session, after we’d worked through that. Initially, he wrestled with the, ‘Oh, I’m sorry for making you do that’ but then he got to that point where he was like, ‘I didn’t realise that anyone cared and somebody who doesn’t have to care’. But that was really touching for him.

Conversely, for another counsellor, increased emotional sensitivity was perceived as both a benefit and a burden. This was attributed to his or her having been involved in a death in custody and his or her subsequent anxiety over the potential risk of another:

I’ve got this base level of sensitivity now that’s increased based on the guy who died in prison ... I worry more about a death in custody now and avoiding clients who I think might be at a higher risk … I’ve become much more self-aware of my own sensitivities and vulnerabilities as well, which probably enhances my work on some level, but also makes me a bit more kind of vulnerable.

This example again highlights the wide variation of counsellors’ experience and perceptions associated with counselling in a prison environment.

Some participants who did not specifically comment on the place of their emotions in practice situations referred to prisoners’ emotions rather than their own ‘emotional undercurrents’ (Ward, 2010, p. 48) and self-awareness. The extent to which they recognised this as an important part of the counselling dynamic was unclear. Thompson (2009a) makes a critical point in this regard, commenting that a practitioner engaging in practice without a sophisticated understanding of the emotional complexities of the work is ‘potentially a recipe for disaster’ (p. 96).

7.3.3.2. Awareness of Intrapsychic Processes: The Subtleties of Practice

Closely related to the previous category was counsellors’ awareness of the less tangible aspects of practice in terms of differentiating their own intrapsychic processes from those of prisoners during sessions. Interestingly, the small number of participants who

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18 Counsellor’s identity intentionally encrypted to preserve anonymity.
commented on these processes were mostly workers at prisons where opportunities for longer-term counselling were possible and whose practice focus included the framework referred to as psychodynamics.

Psychodynamic theory recognises the existence of conscious and unconscious dynamics that shape human behaviour, ‘above and below the surface’ (Ruch, 2012, p. 1321). It is based on the premise that practitioners are not immune from some personal involvement in their reaction to clients. Brearley (1995) argued that a lack of knowledge of these subtle processes and dynamics, of what the worker brings into the practice encounter, impedes proper assessment of the client. When reflecting on her experience, Counsellor 5 alluded to the term ‘counter-transference’, commonly cited in the therapy literature to explain one aspect of the subtleties involved in worker–client dynamics:

> We have expectations of how an offender should act and behave. And also those unconscious things, buttons might be pressed where they remind us of someone in our past or another offender we’ve worked with and perhaps we expect them to behave in a particular way because of that … Everyone has buttons and that’s normal, but recognising that sometimes if we come out of a session feeling a particular way, that’s not necessarily all about the client’s behaviour, that can be about those buttons that are being pressed for us.

A further three counsellors indicated that their awareness of these intrapsychic processes that occurred during counselling sessions prompted them to question their reactions. For example, they asked themselves, ‘What’s going on here, is it me [or] is it him [prisoner]?’ (Counsellor 13) or ‘Are they [prisoner] hitting a trigger spot in me that I’m not quite aware of?’ (Counsellor 29). These responses also accord with the views of Ruch et al. (2010) who argued that workers are better placed to make sense of what is occurring in confusing situations with clients by posing the question, ‘Is it them or is it me?’ (p. 35).

While attention to these processes is perceived as pivotal to psychodynamic theory and longer-term therapy, the capacity to do so is acknowledged in the therapy literature as difficult (Brill, 1998; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011; Ward & McMahon, 1998). The findings clearly indicate that focusing on these subtle processes was not standard practice in the context of a prison. As highlighted in previous chapters, the limited contact time available for counselling prisoners impeded this activity from becoming a focal point. This is one possible explanation for why only a small percentage of participants commented on these subtleties.
7.3.3.3. Capacity for Critical Self-Reflection

The ability to reflect on oneself as a practitioner, described by Brearley (1995) as a worker’s ‘self-questioning’ capacity (p. 71), is identified in the social work literature as a key element of best practice (Jones et al., 2008; Ruch et al., 2010; Thompson, 2015). Ruch et al. (2010) contended that although challenging, a willingness to remain open to self-examination and reflection when working with clients is necessary to develop and grow in self-awareness. Without openness and a commitment to authenticity, there is a danger of becoming blinded or entrenched in bureaucracy-driven practices (p. 41).

Three of the 36 participants said they regularly reflected on what they were seeking to do in their practice and considered their progress towards that endeavour. One of the three counsellors commented:

I think I’m a very reflective practitioner, I think a lot about what I do. I reflect openly about how we [counsellors] think we do things. (Counsellor 18)

In adopting a self-reflective approach, counsellors sought to avoid what Thompson (2015) identified as ‘standardized, formula responses’ (p. 263) to the situations they encountered within counselling sessions. Thus, they could retain a sense of professional integrity and personal connectivity.

It became apparent during interviews, however, that most counsellors were so immersed in the demands of the role that their initial responses to the researcher’s questions were emotive rather than reflective. This suggested insufficient ‘thinking space’ (Payne, 2017) to reflect on the broader aspects of working in a prison system and of how they might contribute to that process. Most commonly, participants had to work themselves into a reflective space to give more detailed responses, which indicated that working from a ‘self-questioning’ space was not the routine mode of ‘being’ for most prison counsellors.

7.3.3.4. Awareness of Underlying Motivation for Becoming a Helping Professional

In addition to the three categories already discussed, a brief consideration of participant motivation is warranted. Very few participants reflected on the underlying factors that may have affected their career trajectory and resulted in their employment in a confronting environment such as a prison. Conflicting views exist within the counselling literature about the necessity for practitioners to understand their
unconscious motivation for becoming a helping professional. Some authors argue that insight is required into the reasons for choosing that path, whether ‘good, bad, pure or otherwise’ (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006, p. 9), to enable workers to operate from a much stronger position. The theory follows that a practitioner’s decision to work in the helping professions or join certain organisations is driven, albeit consciously or unconsciously, by unresolved developmental issues and unprocessed experience from early life (Mnguni, 2012; Ward, 2010), referred to by Halton (1994) as ‘unconscious determinants’ (p. 111).

Four counsellors expressed an interest in exploring their underlying personal motives for working in a prison setting and were curious to know why some people were attracted to the role. These counsellors provided three different explanations: a fascination with crime or a certain type of offender; an inherent desire to ‘rescue’ people; and, as Counsellor 20 jokingly suggested, being a ‘kind of screwed up person, myself included’. Counsellor 32 did not consider she had any underlying psychological reasons for joining the Prison Counselling Service:

I haven’t come in with an agenda … I’ve not come in because innately I want to rescue people. I mean, maybe all psychologists want to rescue I don’t know, but I sort of think I’m a bit more neutral, well I haven’t come in with that agenda I’m going to go in and work with prisoners and that’s what my life’s going to be about. Probably more open minded in that way.

Although curious to understand her motivation for choosing to work in a prison environment, Counsellor 34 posed a rhetorical question for which she was unable to provide a clear explanation or answer. Her comments highlighted some of the structural, cultural and interpersonal challenges that prison counsellors face regularly, and that impact on counsellors’ sense of ‘fit’ within this system:

What is it about us that draws us to working in prisons, because there is something about us that pulls us in here, because there aren’t a lot of people who want to work in a prison. They’re not attracted to it, they don’t find it appealing, yet there is something for me that does do that and I’m often interested in what it is about us that come to a place where we work with a very difficult population, a traumatised population and we have to fight often for our own existence in this place.

Regardless of whether participants’ underlying motivations were recognised, it is possible that their reasons for deciding to work in a prison counselling role were linked to the initial reasons given for becoming a helping professional (outlined in Chapter 4).
7.3.4 Resilience and Optimism

Resilience theory is relevant to this discussion, in that the existence of certain predisposing factors are claimed to enable some practitioners to manage the demands of emotionally stressful work better than others. The quality of resilience has been described as ‘people’s ability to deal with stress, pressure and the demands made of them’ (Howe, 2008, p. 106) and to ‘adapt in the face of tragedy, trauma [and] adversity’ (Newman, 2005, p. 227). For a minority of participants, this quality appeared to be based on three factors: previous experience in challenging work environment(s); family background; and determination. In addition, for most participants a further factor, trait optimism, was identified.

7.3.4.1. Previous Experience in Challenging Work Environment(s)

As outlined in Chapter 4, the personal circumstances by which participants arrived in the prison system varied. The responses suggested however, that practitioners with prior experience of working with challenging client groups and/or work environments were less distressed by the demands of the role and seemed better able to maintain a sense of secure professional identity. For example, Counsellor 9 attributed the development of her resilience partly to her previous work experience in communities generally regarded as dangerous, where the risk of being killed was an everyday reality. The combination of these factors seemed to have provided her with a solid foundation for managing the rigours of subsequent roles:

You drive into a [town], you’re fearful but then I kept thinking, but I’m working with families where children were being tortured and so when you put yourself in perspective of what you’re doing you realise, I might be more reticent now, but when you’re 25 and you’re doing this for the reasons that you’re doing it for, you don’t think about it.

7.3.4.2. Family Background

The qualities associated with resilience are believed to have been forged in part in family life and include how people ‘perceive, appraise, approach and tackle stresses and challenges’ (Howe, 2008, p. 107). Several participants referred to ‘sayings’ and advice they received from their parents during their lives, which helped them to remain balanced and maintain a sense of robustness when facing difficult situations within the prison. These included comments such as, ‘My parents always said no matter what, someone will always be in a worse off position than what you are’ (Counsellor 27) and
‘As my mother would say, just get up and keep going’ (Counsellor 3). For Counsellor 33, resilience was a quality he attributed to his family of origin, and an influence on his world view:

I guess it’s more into resilience, like a belief and that’s something that I’ve cultivated through my family. Cultivated from my dad, my mum, because I’ve seen what they have gone through when they were younger because they [experienced] the Second World War, so they talked about how it was very distraught when they were younger in terms of surviving and getting jobs … So that kind of stuff gets me thinking that, well, I’m born to them, I should be able to do that. Even if I’m not able to do that, I can learn how to do that and I tap it from my family as well. So, I guess all these attitudes, values, beliefs are all shaped, cultivated from family, and also from experiences.

7.3.4.3. Determination

For other participants, resilience was associated with a sense of determination and an ability to navigate the prison system to benefit clients. Counsellor 30 identified a ‘never say die’ approach and Counsellor 19’s resilience was founded on principles she acquired during her tertiary education:

I have this philosophy. I developed it when I was studying, and it is that my job as a social worker is to find a way through a system, right, that’s my job.

Other responses aligned with the literature in that resilience is identified as people’s perception and approach to stress, rather than people’s natural disposition and their ability to focus on the positive aspects of a negative situation (Howe, 2008; Thompson, 2008). Counsellor 18 demonstrated this attribute by taking responsibility for her professional self in the workplace. In doing so, she maintained a sense of personal integrity at the professional–organisational interface:

I think there’s always room for improvement and I guess rather than complain and whinge and say, ‘Oh, they’ve [the organisation] always done it like this, they’re not going to change’, you perhaps need to see how you can make change happen at your level so that things can work better.

7.3.4.4. Trait Optimism

A major theme to emerge from the study related to counsellors’ personal attributes and a factor associated with resilience was trait optimism. Several authors claim that there is an interactive relationship between optimism and resilience, and argue that these two variables accompany each other during situations identified as adverse (Carver, Scheier,
& Segerstrom, 2010; Kelsey, 2012; Souri & Hasanirad, 2011). Most participants (30) described themselves in terms suggestive of an underlying optimism and as people who had a positive attitude towards themselves as helping professionals (‘I’m a glass half full type of person’, ‘an optimist’ and ‘idealistic’). Counsellor 25 said:

I think I’m very idealistic. Whenever I get a person sitting in front of me, I’ll always think this could be the person that I could make a difference to, so I try to find that purpose in my job.

Despite acknowledging the stresses associated with the role, optimism and hopefulness were clearly attributes that contributed to practitioner resilience. Further, feeling optimistic when counselling prisoners was identified as a necessary component of professional practice, with terms such as ‘critical’, ‘absolutely essential’, ‘fundamental’ and ‘next to love and oxygen’ mentioned.

Trotter (2015) identified an association between a worker’s optimistic approach and the promotion of hope in involuntary clients, a view echoed by Counsellor 9:

I think if you’re a positive and a happy person and you model that and you enthuse that, [prisoners] will see it and will want to be in that space and will hopefully want to emulate that and it’ll give them hope.

While optimism was acknowledged as an important attribute and attitude for professional practice, it was not universally perceived as unproblematic. A minority group of predominantly experienced practitioners expressed the view that naïve optimism when working with this client group was risky and could inadvertently disempower prisoners. Although these participants were confident in themselves as helping professionals and tried to foster prisoners’ belief in a positive future, they were equally mindful of what was realistically achievable given the circumstances of many prisoners’ lives.

Counsellor 4 was mindful of not leading prisoners metaphorically ‘up the garden path’ in terms of their future life aspirations. Counsellor 15 claimed that despite counsellors’ best intentions and efforts, not every prisoner was perceived as ‘available for change’ in terms of individual motivation and mental capacity. Counsellor 16 was wary of fostering helplessness in prisoners and his comments suggested that he perceived some counsellors (who were new to prison work) as misguided. Similar issues have been raised in the counselling literature. For example, Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2011)
and White and Graham (2010) cautioned workers (especially new practitioners) against being overly optimistic and making everything ‘positive and upbeat’ (p. 28).

I’ve seen people come in thinking they’re God’s gift to the prison and they want to take the advocacy role … However, you can overdo it and say these poor prisoners we need to stand up for them all the time, whereas they need to learn to stand up for themselves. (Counsellor 16)

Based on the findings, the individual attributes identified by participants assisted counsellors, by varying degrees, to manage the demands of the role by acting as a buffer against the numerous stresses and external pressures incurred while working in the prison system.

7.4 Summary Comments

Chapter 7 examined the more intimate space of the participants themselves and their individual/psychological experience of working within a prison environment. In foregrounding the intra-personal level, in line with Thompson’s theoretical model, the chapter has discussed how counsellors perceived the work as affecting their personal and professional lives. Further, it explored the factors that helped them maintain a sense of inner balance and congruence as people within this role.

Participants identified some positive effects of working in a prison, although the predominant finding was that the prison counsellor role can be very stressful and, for some people, traumatising at times. Most participants had been adversely affected by the work in some way, both as professionals and in their lives outside work. With a few exceptions, participants seemed unaware that a state of heightened anxiety among counselling staff had become normalised within this service and subculture. Counsellors with a diverse range of experience prior to joining the prison service seemed better able than others to manage the anxieties associated with the role. They were alert to symptoms suggestive of burnout and implemented strategies when work stress began to impact on their work performance and personal lives.

Despite the numerous challenges associated with the role, it was clear this was a group of people who were committed to their work as helping professionals, having discovered that working in the prison system was something that could be positive and rewarding. Some of the factors that helped sustain them in the role included:
• the nature of the work and client group, which was a source of intellectual stimulation for many
• an opportunity to work in accordance with their beliefs in social justice
• the support they obtained via supervision and/or their team
• being able to maintain a work–non-work balance, identified as crucial for maintaining motivation, connectivity and a sense of personal equilibrium, the latter facilitated by a clear demarcation between work and home, and a regular self-care regime.

Individual experiences varied widely. For example, access to or the adequacy of supervision varied, as did whether counsellors worked as part of a (functional) team. In addition, the ability to maintain a ‘balance’ also differed. Some struggled to maintain a work-life balance due to their inability to switch off or uphold a self-care regime.

Participants brought a range of personal–professional attributes to the role, which served as a buffer against workplace stress and enabled a sense of congruence with ‘self’ to varying degrees. Qualities such as empathy, a non-judgemental attitude and optimism helped participants make sense of their role and work with people, many of whom had committed violent crimes.

The various qualities identified were rarely all present in any one person and as is frequently the case in many other professions, highlight the importance of adequate supervision and ongoing professional development opportunities.

Chapter 8 synthesises the findings of the thesis by linking the major themes that became evident during the interviews.
Chapter 8: Seeking Coherence from Complexity

Chapter 8 brings together the findings of the previous four chapters and reflects on how they relate to the framing model for the thesis: Thompson’s Personal Cultural Structural analysis and the notion of embedment (see Figure 8.1). The model provides a means for understanding how counsellors’ notions of self, organisation and role, as identified from the findings, were embedded within the cultural and structural constraints of the prison system.

![Figure 8.1: Thompson’s Conceptual Framework](image)

Three key themes emerged. They are discussed in relation to Thompson’s model and help to provide an overall picture of what ‘being’ in the prison counsellor role in the WA prison system entailed in the current historical context.

8.1 Reflection on Key Themes

As has been highlighted throughout this thesis, criminal justice agencies are complex bureaucracies and a prison system is one in which change and uncertainty mostly prevail. This variability is attributable in part to competing discourses and changing political tides concerning the place of prisons in society and the competing priorities of containment or rehabilitation. A prison system is a peopled environment run by people, a system that Weinberg (1942) defined over half a century ago as ‘a configuration of social relationships, a dynamic social process in its inner dynamic sense’ (p. 726). As with other institutions, social and political forces influence the flow of social divisions and associated power relations within this system and prison counsellors are one part of a division within this dynamic structure.
To some extent, the diverse range of perceptions and experiences among participants regarding their work in the prison also reflected the complexities of the prison system. This diversity highlighted the uniqueness of the individual—the Personal level—which is at the heart of Thompson’s model. It also illustrated how counsellors’ embedment within a structural–cultural system affected what they experienced and, importantly, what they perceived they could achieve in their work with prisoners. While there were commonalities within the range of responses, it was apparent that not all counsellors shared the same views. For every response, a different view and experience was frequently conveyed. Hence, there was no neat way to describe counsellors’ experiences. Despite this, being a group of people who were committed to their work as helping professionals, most had experienced some discord to varying degrees at the structural–cultural interface. This discord related primarily to the prison environment itself, which for many was clearly a place of adversity and anxiety at several levels, although was often associated with the specific prison where counsellors were located. The discord was also attributable to ambiguity and ambivalence within the system about the specific purpose and parameters of the prison counselling role.

Given that the structure and culture of the prison system are so closely intertwined, with each affecting the other, these two levels are discussed in the following sections.

8.2 A Climate of Adversity

Working in a prison environment is a very difficult and, at times, quite thankless task. Not everyone will be suited to that type of work - either at all or for long periods (Allen, 2000, p. 5).

The findings conform to the corrections literature in that structural and cultural factors were identified as key contributors to the experience of prisons as environments of adversity for prison counsellors. A prison has been likened to a paramilitary organisation and counsellors’ embedment in this system and culture requires them to straddle two worlds: one concerned with partnership, connection and relationship-based intervention, and the other with obeying the rules and requirements of a command-and-control culture.

The key issues identified related to the impact of increased prisoner numbers, resourcing, personal safety, relationships with custodial staff and management
arrangements for the counselling service. In many cases, these issues were quite clearly interrelated.

A key factor that affected the Prison Counselling Service significantly related to changes in prisoner numbers. The burgeoning prisoner population across the state, as outlined in Chapter 1, has placed increasing demand on the capacity of WA prisons. Subsequently, this has created additional pressure for the Prison Counselling Service as staffing levels have not increased in line with the growth in prisoner numbers. One consequence was increased prisoner referrals, particularly prisoners deemed to be a suicide risk, and a heightened focus on risk assessment and crisis intervention, leaving little or no time available for counselling per se. This created discord at the professional–organisational interface because despite being a necessary component of the counselling service, risk assessment was identified as the least satisfying aspect of the role by the vast majority of counsellors.

In addition to the staff resourcing issues outlined above, the prisons lacked the physical resources required for effective counselling practice. As discussed in Chapter 4, some counsellors were forced to compete with custodial staff for office space to interview prisoners or were relegated to places that lacked privacy. This was a source of ongoing frustration and reinforced participants’ sense of working in a challenging environment that did not support their professional needs. Procedural issues that restricted the times available for counselling prisoners were additional structural barriers imposed on counsellors embedded in this system, further impeding their ability to work effectively.

From a safety perspective, the increase in the prisoner population also necessitated heightened vigilance among all staff. As noted in Chapter 4, if prisoners decided to act in concert and overcome the prison, staff safety would be compromised. Further, escalating caseloads have the potential to place prison counsellors at greater risk because they have less time to familiarise themselves with prisoners’ records before interviews. The prisoner population includes many people with histories of violence and some with serious mental health problems whose offences included unprovoked physical assaults against other people. Moreover, as identified in Chapter 6, many prisoners are perceived as career criminals, lacking in remorse for their offending behaviour. Therefore, engagement with this cohort is not only professionally challenging, but presents an additional potential risk to counsellors’ personal safety.
The dominant factor identified in the findings that contributed to a climate of adversity, however, was cultural. This related to the rules of belongingness within the prisons and the nexus of staff relationships. Thompson (2012) identified the powerful influence of culture in ‘determining what is perceived as normal’ (p. 34) in certain circumstances. It was clear from the findings that ‘normal’ in the context of the prison setting was determined by custodial staff, who were perceived by counsellors to hold referential power. There were variations between settings, however, in that some prison settings made it more difficult than others in terms of counsellors’ sense of ‘fit’ and interactions with custodial staff. The absence of consistent ‘norms’ relating to the treatment of prisoners by custodial staff and counsellors was clearly apparent.

The underlying values of counselling and imprisonment, which are identified in the literature as based on ‘profound ideological and ethical differences’ (Williams, 1996, p. 100), manifested as tension for prison counsellors. This related mainly to some prison officers’ punitive and discriminatory attitudes and behaviour towards prisoners, but also some officers’ prejudicial responses and attitudes towards prison counsellors and the Prison Counselling Service generally. Counsellors mostly chose not to challenge the prison officer culture for fear that prisoners would be punished further by the officers, or counsellors’ safety and protection in the prison grounds compromised because of discordant relations between the two staff groups. Also, counsellors were reliant on prison officers for access to prisoners and some prison officers were identified as uncooperative in this regard. This created a further obstacle for counsellors, who were already ‘time-poor’ and limited by prisoner lockdown periods and prison musters.

These adverse conditions were compounded by the fact that Offender Services Management was located off site, resulting in counsellors feeling unsupported. When conflict arose between counsellors and custodial staff for example, counsellors were often left to manage the situation on their own. There was a lack of communication between people in positions of power at head office and frontline staff, particularly for counsellors based at regional prisons. Counsellors reported a ‘top-down’ management approach in that they were rarely consulted or kept informed by Offender Services Management of changes that affected the Prison Counselling Service. In addition, there was an identified absence of clear leadership to explicitly recognise and address the potential for trauma and professional debilitation among counselling staff.
It seems paradoxical that although prison counsellors are embedded within this structure and culture, their descriptions indicated that they were essentially peripheral. The Prison Counselling Service is complementary, rather than central, to the prison service, a subsystem within an arguably closed system with no clear rules to guide counselling staff. Consequently, counsellors had to define their own rules when situations arose.

8.2.1 An Anxious Environment

A key issue emerging from this thesis is the notion of an anxious environment; unpredictability and uncertainty seemed to exist within the prison system at all levels, related to the competing demands of regulation and rehabilitation, limited resourcing and a growing prisoner population. Elements of anxiety were evident for prison counsellors in that their embedment within this ‘over vigilant and bureaucratic culture’ (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012, p. 230) resulted in their subjection to multiple stressors, affecting their capacity to operationalise their role. Prison work is inherently dangerous and the client group is high risk, unpredictable and in many cases, demanding. In addition, concerns about prisoners deemed to be a suicide risk, and the investigative processes that follow a death in custody, compound this anxiety. As highlighted in Chapter 7, the stress and anxiety associated with the role affected counsellors differently. In some circumstances, it had resulted in (near) burnout. These issues align with the views of Polizzi et al. (2014), who pointed out that correctional counsellors may feel overwhelmed by the experiences they face when working in demanding settings such as prisons with limited resources and ‘high need clients’ (p. 75).

The work of Menzies (1961) and others provides insight into the anxieties faced by people working in public and social service organisations. It is proposed that anxiety exists not only at the individual level, but as an organisational phenomenon (Mnguni, 2012; Morrison, 1996; Obholzer & Zagier Roberts, 1994). Anxiety in public service work, it is claimed, results from the contentious nature of the wider socio-cultural landscape within which public service organisations find themselves, with organisations being delegated impossible tasks, acting as a form of container that relieves the rest of society of ethical and moral anguish (Mnguni, 2012).

The vast increase in prisoner numbers over the last decade places resourcing pressure on the prison system to meet the organisational objectives of regulation and rehabilitation. As the agency assigned with this difficult and contentious task in an increasingly ‘risk
society’ (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012, p. 230), it is conceivable that anxiety as an organisational phenomenon will continue to grow and affect staff at all levels. To work in the ‘trying and often dispiriting conditions’ (Krantz, 1994, p. xvi) characteristic of a prison system, all staff, and notably counsellors, have to possess ‘tools and capacities which can meet the challenge of this complexity’ (Hoggett, 2006, p. 187).

The frequent references to a lack of appropriate training from the Department to accommodate the diverse range of prisoners with whom counsellors are required to work are significant in this regard. This issue is also alluded to by Scharf, Dindinger and Vogel (1983), given ‘the unique demands of the correctional environment’ (p. 39). Working with special needs and traditional Aboriginal prisoners stood out as examples in which many staff struggled professionally and questioned their clinical skills. This situation was compounded for staff working at prisons where there were no other colleagues on site with whom they could consult.

8.3 A Minefield of Ambiguity and Ambivalence

The general findings showed that ambiguity and ambivalence at all levels of the prison system regarding the specific purpose and role responsibilities of the Prison Counselling Service affected prison counsellors’ experience and ability to operationalise their role. At the structural level, the lack of clear role definition was evident from the ambiguous organisational descriptor of the Prison Counselling Service on the Department’s website (as outlined in Chapter 4). There was a lack of role clarity for a subdivision that is nominally therapeutic, but is not defined as such within this semi-military organisation. This resulted in counsellors defining their rules of practice and ‘hoped for’ outcomes to align with their own values and perceptions of what it meant to be a helping professional.

Ambiguity as to whether ‘counselling’ was central or peripheral to prison operational policy affected counsellors’ interactions with prisoners and varied between settings. For a significant majority of counsellors, the prioritised task involved assessing prisoners for suicide risk. Others were able to develop longer-term therapeutic relationships with prisoners in accordance with what they perceived to be ‘real’ counselling practice. However, in prisons with opportunities for longer-term work, there was some ambiguity regarding the parameters of counselling sessions. The allocated time frame for each session was not stipulated and guidelines as to the number of sessions permitted were
similarly absent. There was ambivalence among counsellors who were able to provide longer-term counselling as to whether ‘therapy’ and exploring a prisoner’s past in greater detail were appropriate given the prison context. At the cultural level, a lack of understanding was identified in relation to prison officers’ notions of what prison counselling specifically entailed (e.g., the need for confidentiality and counsellor–client privacy during sessions). Consequently, counsellors had to determine their own parameters, and in many circumstances, had to justify their decisions to prison officers.

A second significant ambiguity highlighted by counsellors related to the lines of authority and structural hierarchy within the system, which made them accountable both to custodial and central management. With Offender Services Management based off site, counsellors generally took their instructions from prison (custodial) management if problems requiring immediate attention arose within the prison. This was not ideal, particularly in circumstances in which opinions regarding assessment of prisoner wellbeing differed between custodial staff and prison counsellors.

At this structural level, ambiguity as a key theme was again evident in relation to the broader goals and anticipated outcomes for the Prison Counselling Service. As with the documented guidelines for the prison counsellor role, the outcomes for the service are described in general terms, related to suicide prevention and rehabilitation of prisoners thereby reducing recidivism. No clear guidelines were identified however, as to how these outcomes were measured in terms of scale, immediacy or longevity, or to how prison counsellors were expected to achieve these results.

The findings revealed a range of counsellor interpretations as to what constituted a positive outcome. In the pragmatic and immediate sense, preventing prisoner suicide was clearly a ‘common’ goal among prison personnel. The Prison Counselling Service’s primary task of risk assessment over ‘conventional’ counselling practice is an indication of the organisation’s priority in this regard. In addition to preventing prisoner suicide per se, a positive outcome was perceived in several ways. This included a reduction of prisoner numbers on the at-risk referral list. Success in this instance was equated with quelling the constant demands on the service despite limited staff resources. From a clinical perspective, a positive outcome was interpreted as prisoners stabilising after a period of crisis and adjusting to prison life because of counsellor’s involvement. There appears to be no clear guidance from the Department in this regard.
As identified in Chapter 6, there was also some ambiguity around what ‘helping’ prisoners meant in terms of a positive outcome. Several potential therapeutic outcomes were associated with success in the immediate and long-term sense, measured in terms of the quality of the counsellor–prisoner relationship. This included helping prisoners to feel better about themselves generally after their engagement in a counselling session and through prisoners’ experience of a supportive and respectful relationship. Encouraging prisoners to achieve small practical goals in preparation for release was also identified as a positive outcome, as was working with prisoners in counselling sessions to achieve compliance and good behaviour within the prison.

In addition, some ambiguity was evident regarding the longer-term goal of prisoner rehabilitation. The concept of rehabilitation was poorly defined at the upper level of the organisation, which manifested as role confusion at ‘the coalface’ in the sense that counsellors employed in the specialist role (exclusively counselling) tended to view rehabilitation as the responsibility of programs staff. It was unclear what counsellors who held this view thought they were otherwise doing in their interactions with prisoners, although the issue could be partly explained by semantics. More specifically, the term ‘rehabilitation’ is often used as a synonym for ‘treatment’ in the correctional literature (see Chapter 4) and thus, equated with programmatic intervention rather than counselling per se. Further, there was ambivalence regarding the concept of prisoner rehabilitation and whether this was an achievable outcome.

At the personal level, managing to survive the day constituted a positive outcome for some counsellors. Others were ambivalent and questioned the worth of their actions and achievements in their work with prisoners.

8.3.1 Defining ‘Effective’ Practice—A Contested Domain

Much of the ambiguity and uncertainty associated with the prison counselling role can be attributed to the lack of consensus in the general counselling literature regarding the concept and definition of effective practice. As highlighted in Chapter 2, there are multiple discourses and different sets of knowledge from different disciplines concerning effective counselling practice, and no agreed approach regarding ‘what works’ when working with offenders in prisons. Prison counsellors are left to make their own sense of vigorously debated theoretical material regarding effective practice and an activity with no defined parameters.
Thompson (2009b) claimed that, ‘There is no one definitive answer to the question of what is good practice’ (p. 175). However, the literature is unanimous in identifying the quality of the relationship between the practitioner and client as a key component of effective practice in terms of positive client outcomes. This ‘success’ is identified as highly dependent on practitioners developing a working alliance with the client (Towl, 2006, p. 21). As illustrated throughout this thesis, the likelihood of forming an alliance with a prisoner was impeded by limited opportunities for longer-term work. It was apparent that what is regarded as enabling ‘effective’ counselling from a theoretical perspective was less easily applied in practice within the prison context. This meant that counsellors needed to develop their own interpretations of what constituted effective practice based on their own paradigmatic assumptions and worldviews.

8.4 Beingness-in-the-Prison World

The findings have highlighted some of the unavoidable tensions and conflicts that exist for people assuming a remedial role in a system and culture that mostly mitigates against that possibility. As workers in a system responsible for the regulation and rehabilitation of prisoners, prison counsellors are necessarily placed in an ambiguous position that is likely to remain given the dual purpose of prisons. As the researcher, I discovered several factors, personal, cultural and structural, that influence counsellors’ perceptions and capacity to manage this system and role, and the development of a sense of professional identity. Two key factors, existential and experiential, stood out as impacting on how those perceptions were formed, which led to the central element of Thompson’s model, the personal. As people technically embedded within the structure and culture of the prison system, counsellors are also separate in that each counsellor brings their own set of individual characteristics and personal beingness to the role, as well as their own personal experience(s).

8.4.1 Existential Factors

To assist with this notion of people’s beingness-in-the-world, I drew on the philosophical framework: existentialism. As outlined in Chapter 3, existentialism focuses on people’s sense of being-in-the-world. It also considers how people cope with the fact that their existence drives them to want to live a life that nonetheless has many unsatisfactory aspects. Bradford (1969) explained, ‘There is no perfect world and there never will be’ (p. 67). This notion is used to refer to counsellors who had an ability to
balance the tensions of the prison system. All participants managed the work by varying degrees of ease, but some stood out as more able than others to deal with the demands of the role at all three levels: personal, cultural and structural. Despite the numerous obstacles they faced as part of their role, these counsellors remained optimistic, having found their relationships with their clients inherently satisfactory and trusting that their work made a meaningful difference to people’s lives.

Building on the personal attributes identified in Chapter 7, which helped facilitate counsellors’ sense of connectedness as helping professionals, the findings revealed similarities between counsellors who appeared integrated and congruent. Their descriptions were suggestive of practitioners who were inner-directed and had a capacity for critical reflection of self, and other, in the role. They could contextualise and thereby make sense, for example, of prisoners’ violent crimes without fear or judgement. Further, they appeared to have a way of being-in-the-world that helped prisoners believe there was value in committing to the counselling process. With a secure foundation from which to engage empathically with prisoners, they possessed what Ward (2010) referred to as a ‘core self [with] an unmistakably authentic quality to it’ (p. 64). The same author argued that it is possible to achieve ‘something of this quality’ (p. 63) through supervision and educational processes that focus on increasing ‘self-knowledge and self-awareness’ (p. 64). In terms of practice implications in a prison, Ward’s (2010) description illustrates this elusive, existential quality well:

We will all have met colleagues and/or friends who strike us as particularly grounded or centred, and who seem to have a quiet and level-headed confidence in their work, which somehow also conveys itself to clients and others and which may have an effect of calming and reassuring those in distress without resorting to a false pacifying. (p. 63)

8.4.2 Experiential Factors

Counsellors’ perceptions of their work within the prison system were also affected by their experience (which consisted of two elements). The first element was counsellors’ experience of working as a helping professional, either within or outside of the prison system, and time employed within the Prison Counselling Service. The second was counsellors’ location within the prison system.

Generally, participants classified as ‘experienced’ helping professionals had a greater capacity to navigate this system strategically than did their inexperienced counterparts.
Their work experience had provided a way to understand and evaluate this context, their role and the different relationship sets within it. They had achieved professional autonomy, and although they were impacted by the work, they seemed less confounded by some of the distressing experiences they encountered in the prison. This was because they had worked with challenging client groups previously or had gained experience since joining the Prison Counselling Service that taught them to manage this climate of adversity and accommodate ambiguous role requirements. Significantly, they had learnt from experience the importance of maintaining a healthy work–non-work balance to counter the stresses of the role. This balance was enabled through strategies such as engagement in personal therapy and/or external supervision.

As noted in Chapter 6, these counsellors demonstrated a capacity for engagement, understanding and purposive action (Payne, 2002), having recognised they were ‘a channel for help’ rather than helpers per se (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006, p. 9). They were clear about the limits of the relationship with prisoners and of not overstepping the boundaries of role and mandate. Further, they were able to review their previous practices and attitudes, having learnt to re-story their initial idealistic views and motivations to do a ‘good’ job, by replacing it with a more realistic perspective. Through strategic and focused practice, they enabled prisoners to consider new and realistic possibilities for positive change, without doing the thinking and problem solving for the prisoners.

Participants who were new to the helping professions had nothing with which to compare their new career experience in the prison service. Their professional identity and the intricacies of counselling were being formed in the prison setting and their perceptions inevitably coloured by their experience of this one system and in many cases, one prison (see Chapter 4).

The second element that affected counsellors’ perceptions of their work as helping professionals in this system was prison location. As discussed in Chapter 2, the structure of the WA prison system means that each prison setting is essentially unique in terms of geographical location, prisoner population distribution and security rating. Thus, prison location determined counsellors’ specific role responsibilities and work focus. The findings showed that for some counsellors, the work focus at the prison in which they were based matched their practice preference, and therefore, engendered positive perceptions. This related primarily to prisons with opportunities for longer-term
counselling of prisoners and role variation in terms of individual and group work with prisoners.

The culture within the different prisons, specifically relationships with custodial staff, stood out as a key factor that affected how counsellors perceived the prison system generally and their subsequent place within it. Some counsellors clearly struggled more than others did with the behavioural norms they encountered between the different staff subgroups. At prison locations where the prison officer culture towards prisoners, and counsellors, was perceived as harsh, practitioner accounts of their experiences were often coloured by cynicism and despair. Although they endeavoured to give their best effort when working with prisoners, their own experience was one of adversity from working in this fraught environment and culture. They had been overwhelmed at times by the sheer volume of the experience.

Conversely, counsellors who were based at settings where relationships with custodial staff were identified as harmonious had developed positive perceptions and a sense of belonging within this system and culture. This was clearly an important mitigating factor in the context of this demanding role. It could also be attributable, however, to luck or good fortune in the sense that counsellors were located at prisons where the prisoner officer culture was supportive of the Prison Counselling Service in general. This assumption is based on the findings that counsellors who had worked at numerous prison sites specifically commented on the cultural variations they had observed between prisons and prison officer attitudes.

The findings also suggested that counsellors who had developed positive perceptions and relations with custodial staff had gone out of their way to forge collaborative working relationships with the officers, as noted in Chapter 5. By drawing on the interpersonal skills gained through experience, they had an ability to withstand the different pressures within an adverse prison environment without drifting into ‘defensive rigidity’ (Smale & Tuson, 1988, pp. 32–33).

Location was also a factor that affected counsellors’ perceptions and experience in terms of whether a team of counsellors or one counsellor only were employed at the prisons. When the culture within the team was positive, counsellors were able to sustain their motivation for their work, as they felt supported by their immediate colleagues and a sense of belongingness in an otherwise adverse environment. Counsellors based at
prisons where they were able to work in a way that aligned with counsellors’ preferred practice modality (longer-term counselling) also stood out as a factor impacting on the development of positive perceptions.

8.4.3 Developing Resilience within Organisational Constraints

Overall, the findings of this study revealed that there is no ‘simple’ or easy way to describe the complex task of counselling prisoners, nor a way that does justice to the intricacies of practice within this setting and system. There are numerous factors—personal, cultural and structural—however, that impact on people’s experience of this system and help promote the development of a strong sense of professional identity. Consideration of these combined factors helps to illustrate what I believe, as the researcher, are prerequisites for professional strength when working in the prison counsellor role. These requirements are based on the findings in the sense that there were similarities between counsellors whose descriptions indicated that they had developed professional resilience at all three levels (personal, cultural and structural) and were subsequently equipped to meet the demands of this complex role. Saunders (2001) alluded to this capacity when describing practitioners in a prison as people who bring ‘a more fluid way of being that can follow and come alongside the ebb and flow of [prison] life without being pulled into its current’ (p. 32).

At the personal level, these counsellors personified ‘advanced practice’ (Flaskas, 2013, p. 28) both existentially and experientially, as previously outlined. They were experienced helping professionals and had a capacity for reflexivity and awareness of their own beliefs, feelings, values and blind spots. With a balanced perspective and strong sense of personal and professional identity, they had a capacity for synthesising subjective knowledge and experience with external pressures and information. This was enabled by a secure grounding in the realities of organisational life, and of what could be achieved in this context, using tools developed from experience to help them navigate this complex system and the tensions incurred within it at all levels. By remaining informed of the sociopolitical discourses that shaped the WA prison system, they were able to understand the challenges facing the Department and embrace the system.

In addition, these counsellors could ‘operate at the edges’ (Senior & Loades, 2008, p. 276) and steer their way through an intricate system and culture, with an awareness of
the significance of their role. In line with Thompson’s (2010) views of organisational leaders (as distinct from managers and supervisors), these people had a capacity to assume a position of professional leadership with clients and colleagues and an ability to relate to others with integrity. These abilities were particularly evident among counsellors who managed to develop positive working relationships with custodial staff, and in so doing, increased the likelihood of forging positive outcomes for prisoners.

Further, these counsellors sustained their motivation for the work by keeping a healthy work–non-work balance. To help maintain this balance, counsellors identified the importance of a self-care regime, which included social supports, exercise, personal therapy and/or external supervision. These workers chose to remain in this system because their work matched their initial motivation for becoming a helping professional. There was a balance between counsellors’ own ideals and their sense of personal duty.

At the cultural level, developing professional strength was maximised when the nexus of staff relationships in the prisons were positive. First, counsellors who were part of a functioning counselling team clearly benefited from collegial support from their peers. Counsellors could immediately debrief or seek advice from a colleague after stressful counselling sessions with prisoners, rather than having to wait for formal weekly or fortnightly supervision. In addition, counsellors clearly thrived when the culture within the team and between the two disciplines (social work and psychology) was harmonious and one in which different practice philosophies were embraced. Second, and to reiterate, counsellors based at prisons where there was a positive agency culture between counselling and custodial staff clearly benefited from the experience. Counsellors at these locations identified a sense of professional ‘fit’ because they were treated with respect and their professional expertise was valued by custodial staff.

At the structural level, organisational support through regular supervision helped promote the development of professional resilience in counsellors, as it provided a ‘buffer’ against the stressors of the role. It was an opportunity for counsellors to debrief and express their concerns regarding prisoners or custodial staff and importantly, a means for counsellors to increase their self-knowledge and self-awareness.

8.5 Summary Comments

This chapter’s exploration of the research findings has indicated that the WA prison system is complex and the prison environment is a place of adversity, ambiguity and
anxiety for prison counsellors. As a subdivision embedded within this system, drawing on Thompson’s model, several factors (personal, cultural and structural) were identified as facilitating and impeding prison counsellors’ ability to do their work. Prison counsellors work in conditions that make remedial work difficult in the sense that organisational policies, procedures and processes often conflict with counsellors’ personal values and professional aspirations. Some workers, albeit a minority, stood out as professionally resilient and able to manage the challenges they faced in this system. I have argued that this ability is attributable primarily to people’s experience as helping professionals combined with counsellors’ individual characteristics and sense of beingness-in-the world. Second, it is attributable to structural and cultural factors that were in place within the prisons.

Given the potential ramifications to the community regarding the ‘successful’ rehabilitation of prisoners, it is imperative that frontline practitioners working directly with prisoners at arguably one of the most intimate levels of intervention in the prison, are fully supported at all levels to maximise the potential benefits to all concerned.
Chapter 9: Conclusion

This chapter summarises the research aims, how the study was undertaken and the findings. It also discusses what the findings indicate in terms of requirements to advance prison counselling practice in WA.

9.1 Aims

The study sought to explore the views and experiences of practitioners working in the role of ‘prison counsellor’ in WA prisons. Through raising awareness of many of the issues involved, it was hoped that this would lead to new understandings and appreciations of what ‘effective’ counselling work with prisoners might look like. The study was based on my conviction that too little is known descriptively of:

i. the nature of prison counselling work from the perspective of the practitioner
ii. the individual attributes that each counsellor brings to the role that may affect client outcomes.

The question explored in the research was, how do practitioners describe and make sense of their lived experience of working in a prison setting?

The research was conducted using in-depth, open-ended, conversational-style interviews to enable rich qualitative data to be collected. I interviewed 36 prison counsellors across the state and the data collected covered all WA prisons with on-site counselling services at the time of commencing the research. The data were analysed in accordance with Thompson’s (1998, 2012) Personal Cultural Structural (PCS) conceptualisation and the notion of embedment to enable a three-dimensional exploration of people’s identity and provide an overall picture of what it means to ‘be’ a prison counsellor in the WA prison system within the current historical context.

9.2 What Was Found

The research findings were consistent with the correctional literature in the sense that prisons are identified as places of adversity, described by Elliott and Schrink (2009) as ‘brutal’ (p. 38) and by Jenks and Fuller (2014) as places of ‘tension, violence and tragic human waste’ (p. 141). The finding that prison counselling work is complex and at times extremely stressful is also supported by the literature, which describes it as
‘inherently dangerous’ (Armstrong & Griffen, 2004, p. 579) and challenging ‘in the extreme’ (Saunders, 2001, p. 32). The dual responsibilities of regulation and rehabilitation that coexist in the WA prison system compound this situation and, as highlighted in this study, created tension for practitioners employed in a remedial role.

The findings revealed a diverse range of responses as to how counsellors managed this demanding role. However, it was clear that these people were committed to their work as helping professionals and were doing the best they could in difficult circumstances. Despite their awareness of the adversity of their work setting, participants found many aspects of the work to be personally and professionally rewarding. Some people stood out more than others as possessing critical personal strengths that equipped them to manage the stresses they encountered within this system. Factors related to experience and personal beingness-in-the-world were identified as contributing to this ability.

How counsellors made sense of their work and this system also varied. All participants had made some degree of sense of their role and organisational expectations, but had done so differently. An association was apparent, however, between people’s sense making, their motivation for becoming a helping professional and the reasons they chose to stay working in the prison service. For many, this was about making a positive difference to prisoners’ lives, many of whom were perceived as disadvantaged and marginalised.

Helping people to achieve in this system was clearly maximised by establishing a context in which counsellors not just survived, but thrived. Four key findings facilitated this endeavour:

- Counsellors benefited from working at prison settings where a team of counsellors were employed.
- Regular supervision provided by the Department clearly assisted counsellors to manage the rigours of the role.
- Being able to evaluate their practice in terms of efficacy and positive outcomes was dependent on counsellors having the opportunity to provide longer-term counselling to prisoners.
- Counsellors benefited from working at prison settings where the relationship with custodial staff was harmonious and the culture supportive of prison counselling practice.
As the researcher, I also believe there are two influential factors that would help practitioners remain congruent at all three levels—personal, cultural and structural—when working in this very complex environment. First, role clarification with practical guidelines as to how counsellors are expected to achieve their role objectives. This would be facilitated by an induction for new Prison Counselling Service employees that focused on explaining the parameters and idiosyncrasies of prison counselling. This induction would also focus on helping workers understand how the WA prison system functions, how it is managed and how aspects of prison culture may restrict counselling practices. Second, a supportive management team (Offender Services) that communicated regularly with frontline staff so that counsellors felt informed in terms of policy direction and organisational change, and importantly so they felt valued and heard. Recognising and addressing these factors, would enhance counsellors’ sense of professional ‘fit’ within this organisation. When writing about stress and complex work environments more than two decades ago, Morrison (1990) alluded to this point, identifying the challenge as:

Creating environments in which the needs of individuals, as well as those of the organisation, are met. It is hard to be too basic about what those needs are. They are for affection, esteem, belonging, security, identity and competence. (p. 264)

This study differs from others reported in the literature because its focus is on the lived experience of the frontline practitioner in the WA prison system. Therefore, the contribution of this research has been to identify the issues facing prison counsellors in the WA prison system. In so doing, it has helped to clarify the questions that need to be asked regarding the Prison Counselling Service in order to move practice forward, rather than attempting to provide simple solutions. In view of the preceding comments, these questions can be summarised in terms of the following issues:

- the inevitability of adversity in this environment and professional debilitation for people working in a remedial role and recognition of the need for equipping people to manage that adversity
- clarity around role and consideration of how best to utilise prison counsellors’ professional knowledge when working with prisoners
- parameters and structures that enable a collaborative working environment and culture so that prison counsellors feel supported and an integral part of the prison system.
9.3 Final Remarks

In conclusion, complex systems such as prisons will clearly continue to exist because they fulfil society’s need for the segregation of some people who break the law from the wider community. This creates a situation in which people, many of whom may be hostile and unpredictable, are held captive against their will, interfacing with an organisation in a broader societal context that is one of risk aversion, suspicion and reductionist responses to ‘wicked’ situations and behaviour. Given that this is the case, there are some unavoidable tensions and conflicts for people working in a prison counselling role and the people who choose to remain working in these complex settings need to be applauded.

The research has not provided solutions to the many issues facing prison counsellors but it may catalyse discussion, energy and action. In identifying how prison counselling staff think and feel about the work that they do in a regulatory institution, the information gathered may help other practitioners working in prisons and other work settings with similarly complex clientele to recognise the strengths in their practice and become more effective in their role.

Although there are no simple answers, and possibly never will be, through raising awareness of many of the issues involved, it is hoped that the research has played a small part in moving towards advanced levels of practice. It may also be useful to people in leadership roles in terms of understanding some of the challenges faced by their staff.
Afterword

Since conducting the fieldwork stage of this study, the Department has undergone several major restructures. Moreover, in July 2017 its name was changed to the Department of Justice. The Prison Counselling Service has also been reconfigured with an additional service, the Specialist Psychological Services, having been created and to which only psychologists are assigned. It is unclear how the changes to the counselling service will affect the two professions within the prison counselling teams in the longer term.

Further, at the time of submitting this thesis, only six of the 36 participants were still employed as prison counsellors. Five participants had remained in the Department but changed roles, and the remaining 25 had left the Department altogether. Although the reasons for their departures are unclear, it is possible, given the research findings, that the stresses of the role may have been a factor in some cases.

In concluding this research, I wish to acknowledge the positive impact the research process has had on me personally. The impact on the researcher of conducting qualitative, practice-near/insider research, is often discussed in the literature (Cooper, 2009; McLeod, 2011; Wolcott, 2009) and identified as an opportunity for broadening personal and professional learning. The process has been of immense value to me, not only in terms of enriching my understanding of what working in a prison system entails at the broader structural and cultural levels, but also in terms of the knowledge I have gained from participants in terms of developing my own clinical skills and greater ethical awareness.
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Western Australian Prison Development

Table A1: Development of Western Australian Prisons

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Appendix 2: Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Study into the lived experience of Prison Counsellors working in WA prisons.
Deborah Denton PhD Candidate

Dear Prison Counsellor,

I would like to introduce to you Deborah Denton, who I am supervising as a PhD Candidate in the Discipline of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Western Australia. Deborah is also a social work employee of the Department of Corrective Services, in the role of Senior Programs Officer. This information sheet is produced to answer some basic questions about the research that she is conducting and to outline your rights should you agree to participate in the study. Please note that your involvement is entirely voluntary. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me. My contact details appear above.

What is the research about?
Deborah is conducting research in the area of practitioners working in rehabilitative/therapeutic roles with prisoners in Western Australian prisons. Deborah hopes to ask Prison Counsellors to describe, in their own words, how they make sense of their role and their relationships with prisoners and colleagues and what, if anything, sustains them professionally and personally in an environment that might be described as one of adversity for both prisoners and practitioners. She hopes that this information will help other practitioners working with a very vulnerable population, to recognise the strengths in their practice and to become even more effective in their role.

How have participants been recruited for this research?
To recruit Prison Counsellors to be involved in this research, Deborah has approached Denise Mead, Manager of Offender Services, DCS, WA and she has given Deborah permission to invite Prison Counsellors to participate in the study.

How will the research be conducted?
Deborah will be interviewing Prison Counsellors who would like to be involved in the research. These interviews will take place at your workplace (possibly during lockdown periods), in your home or in another place which is convenient to you. The interviews will be recorded and Deborah will then transcribe the recordings. She will then send you the written transcript which you can edit as you wish for accuracy and for what you would like to have included in the research. It may be necessary for another interview to be conducted at a later date.
What information will be included in the published research?
When analysing the content of the interviews, Deborah will be looking for common themes throughout the research. She may include direct quotes from research participants or paraphrased statements. At no time will these statements be identified. At the completion of the research, the interview transcripts will be kept securely for a period of seven years and then destroyed.

What will be done with the information gathered?
The information gathered in interviews will only be viewed by Deborah and myself as the principal researcher for this study. Whilst in use, all material will be stored in a secure location in my personal research setting. Discs and tapes will subsequently be stored in a locked cupboard in the Discipline of Social Work and Social Policy at UWA.

What could go wrong?
If any part of this research process causes you discomfort or distress, we will do whatever possible to assist you to access support and guidance. This could be by suggesting resources that you might access or people that you could talk to. If necessary and with your consent the researcher can speak on your behalf to someone in your department who could assist you.

Informed consent
By signing the enclosed form, you are giving consent for Deborah to contact you to make an appointment for an interview. At any stage you may withdraw your consent verbally or in writing. You don’t have to give any justification or reason for this decision, and you will not be prejudiced in any way for doing this. In this case, any record of your participation in this research will be destroyed unless you agree otherwise. If you wish to participate, please return your consent form to me at the Discipline of Social Work and Social Policy.

Confidentiality
Your name or other identifying details will not be used at any stage in this research and it will not be published in the final thesis or in any other published work relating to this research.

Please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss anything pertaining to this research now or at any time during the research process.

Yours sincerely

Assist/Professor Brenda Clare
March 16th, 2010
Appendix 3: Interview Guide

The research process involves in-depth conversations with prison counsellors to ascertain their sense of their role, and the quality of interactions with prisoners and colleagues. The study seeks to articulate practitioners’ located understanding of their professional identity and the work they do in a regulatory institution, the primary purpose of which is containment and punishment.

Initially, interviews will be loosely structured around the themes listed below. As an inside-researcher who is working within a phenomenological perspective, I will be seeking always to suspend my preconceived assumptions and taken-for-granted notions to be open to the language used and information received from prison counsellors as they articulate their lived experience of working in this role. An ongoing dialogue between self and prison counsellor, self and texts, self and self is required in this iterative hermeneutic process. This process will be fully articulated in the methodology chapter.

Background data

- demographic details
- length of time as a prison counsellor
- number of prisoners on individual case load with brief details of reasons for imprisonment, security rating, length of sentence (all anonymised).

Themes for discussion

- understanding of role—what prison counselling is about, where they fit within the broader system of corrective services
- qualities they bring to the role
- understanding of what being imprisoned means for prisoners
- understanding of the terms ‘hope’, ‘optimism’, ‘positive outlook’
- quality of relationship required for prisoners to feel secure
- how prison counsellors go about developing a positive/secure environment—what facilitates this process; what might impede the process
- costs and benefits to them of undertaking this role.
Appendix 4: Participants’ Experience: Definition

- more than three years as a helping professional

and/or

- had worked in one prison only, plus more than one other agency prior to working with the Prison Counselling Service

or

- had worked in more than one prison, but no other agencies prior to working with the Prison Counselling Service

or

- had worked in more than one prison plus more than one other agency prior to working with the Prison Counselling Service.