

IU International University of Applied Sciences

Written Assignment

Basics of Counseling (DLBPGGGBA01_E)

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The Counselor as a Person and Professional: The Role of Self-Awareness, Personal Characteristics, and Bias in Effective Counseling

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List of Abbreviations

BACP	British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
FIS	Facilitative Interpersonal Skills
SFBT	Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

1 Introduction

Research on psychotherapy suggests that treatment outcomes cannot be explained solely by the therapeutic method being used. Therapists themselves differ in effectiveness, which raises the question of what professional and personal qualities they bring into the therapeutic relationship. Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020) note that therapist effects have been observed across different treatment contexts and that some practitioners consistently achieve better outcomes than others. At the same time, the characteristics responsible for these differences remain difficult to isolate because psychotherapy is shaped by the interaction between therapist, client, treatment approach, and context.

This makes the counselor's role more complex than the image of an objective expert who applies professional knowledge to a client's problem. Counselors bring their own interpersonal style, values, emotional responses, strengths, and limitations into their work. For this reason the IU course book treats self-awareness, self-assessment, self-care, supervision, cultural awareness, and knowledge of personal triggers as part of professional counseling competence (Huxtable, 2023). These qualities can support the therapeutic process, but they can also cause problems when personal reactions, biases, or too little reflection get in the way of responding well to a client. Because professional titles and qualification routes differ between jurisdictions, counselor is used here as a broad term for practitioners providing counseling or psychotherapeutic support.

Against this background, the present assignment examines the following research question: How do counselors' professional preparation, personal characteristics, self-awareness, and biases influence the therapeutic relationship and the quality of counseling? The focus is on how professional and personal factors may contribute to effective practice and where the available evidence remains limited. The question is addressed through a literature-based analysis that combines the IU course book with peer-reviewed systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and selected empirical studies relevant to counselor preparation, therapist characteristics, and therapeutic outcomes.

The paper first considers the counselor's role within the therapeutic relationship, including the limits of complete objectivity. It then examines professional preparation, supervision, self-awareness, and personal development. This is followed by an analysis of characteristics associated with effective counselors, with particular attention to interpersonal skills and therapist effects. Finally, potential biases and personal challenges are considered before the evidence is critically discussed in relation to the limits of defining a universally effective counselor.

2 The Counselor's Role in the Therapeutic Relationship

The counselor's role is sometimes associated with the image of an objective professional who identifies a client's problem and provides the appropriate solution. In practice, however, counseling is more relational and collaborative. Several counseling approaches explicitly reject the assumption that the practitioner

possesses superior knowledge of the client's life. For example, the IU course book describes solution-focused brief therapy as an approach in which the practitioner facilitates the counseling conversation while treating the client as the expert on their own experiences (Huxtable, 2023). This position is also consistent with the ethical principle of autonomy, which requires practitioners to respect clients' capacity for self-determination and to avoid imposing their own values or decisions on them.

Collaboration, however, does not mean that the counselor and client carry identical responsibilities. The counselor has professional obligations that the client does not have, including maintaining appropriate boundaries, protecting confidentiality, explaining the counseling process, and responding to ethical or relational difficulties. Huxtable (2023) emphasizes that professional boundaries exist to protect both the client and the therapeutic relationship and identifies areas such as self-disclosure, physical contact, dual relationships, and session limits as requiring particular care. The counselor therefore occupies a position that is collaborative in relation to the client's goals but asymmetrical in terms of professional responsibility.

The quality of this relationship can also shape the counseling process itself. Rapport and trust may affect whether clients feel able to disclose relevant experiences, while clarifying expectations and the counselor's working methods can make the process more transparent (Huxtable, 2023). Anderson et al. (2016) found something consistent with this: therapists with stronger facilitative interpersonal skills developed stronger therapeutic alliances and achieved better outcomes than therapists with lower observed interpersonal skills. How a counselor takes part in the relationship, in other words, may be clinically relevant in its own right, not just a backdrop to the techniques they apply.

A systemic perspective extends this argument by locating psychological difficulties within broader patterns of relationships and interaction. Systemic therapy conceptualizes mental health symptoms in the context of social systems and directs attention to reciprocal influences between individual difficulties and family or other relational processes (Braus et al., 2025). From this perspective, the counselor does not simply observe an isolated individual from a neutral external position. Instead, counseling involves examining relational patterns and meanings while recognizing that the therapeutic interaction itself forms part of the system in which change is negotiated. This view further weakens the idea of the counselor as a detached, all-knowing observer and places greater emphasis on reflexivity and collaboration.

The counselor, then, is not an all-knowing authority, but not a passive facilitator either. Effective practice requires a balance between collaboration and professional responsibility. The counselor must respect the client's autonomy while also watching their own contribution to the relationship, holding ethical boundaries, and adapting to the needs and context of the individual client. This relational understanding sets up the next question: why professional preparation, supervision, and self-awareness matter so much in counselor development.

3 Professional Preparation and Inner Work

Professional preparation provides the formal foundation for counseling practice, but no single academic or certification route applies internationally. Requirements differ by jurisdiction and profession. As one illustrative professional standard, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, n.d.) requires students beginning eligible training from February 2026 to undertake at least a Level 4 qualification or equivalent, a minimum two-year course with at least 300 guided learning or tutor-contact hours, and an integral supervised placement of at least 100 client hours. These requirements are not a universal legal rule; they illustrate how formal education, supervised client work, ethical expectations, and personal development can be combined within a professional pathway. In this paper, professional preparation therefore includes knowledge, ethical competence, practical skills, supervision, and reflective capacity.

Preparation also requires counselors to understand clients in relational and systemic context. Huxtable (2023) emphasizes in its family and marriage counseling material that relationships affect quality of life, that difficulties affecting one family member can influence those around them, and that collaborative work may involve several members of the relational system. This is compatible with the systemic perspective discussed above, in which the counselor attends to reciprocal patterns rather than treating the client as an isolated individual (Braus et al., 2025). For the counselor, such a perspective increases the importance of reflexivity: professional preparation must include awareness of how the practitioner's own questions, interpretations, and responses become part of the interaction through which problems and possible changes are explored.

3.1 Professional Competence and Supervision

Professional competence involves more than familiarity with counseling models or techniques. Counselors must be able to work within ethical boundaries, evaluate the appropriateness of their methods, communicate their approach to clients, recognize limits in their own competence, and respond to cultural and relational differences. Huxtable (2023) also presents supervision as an important part of professional practice because it allows counselors to discuss cases with a more experienced professional, evaluate their services, and reflect on their own emotional responses. Supervision in this sense is not a one-off checkpoint but a recurring space that runs alongside practice, giving counselors somewhere to bring uncertainty before it hardens into a habit. It serves both a developmental and a protective function: it can support learning while also creating a structured setting in which difficult decisions, relational tensions, or possible blind spots can be examined by someone outside the immediate counselor-client relationship.

The empirical evidence for supervision is more cautious than the course book's strong professional endorsement. Huxtable (2023) presents supervision as an important means of evaluating services and processing counselors' emotional responses, whereas Schreyer et al. (2025) found that, across 32 studies, pooled effects on therapist competence, therapeutic alliance, and patient symptoms were generally small and non-significant, with more favorable results in some comparisons with passive controls. Wide variation across supervision models, study designs, and outcome measures also makes causal conclusions hard to

draw. A reasonable reading is that supervision has a clear role in reflective oversight and professional development, even if the evidence that it directly improves client outcomes is still thin.

3.2 Self-Awareness and Personal Development

Inner work refers to the counselor's capacity to examine their own reactions, strengths, limitations, values, and recurring interpersonal patterns. The IU course book links self-awareness with introspection, recognition of strengths and weaknesses, self-assessment, self-care, and an understanding of personal triggers that may affect professional interactions (Huxtable, 2023). This matters because counseling involves close interpersonal engagement. Irritation, anxiety, over-identification, defensiveness, or a strong urge to rescue a client can arise even when the counselor means to stay professional. Self-awareness does not remove these reactions, but it makes them easier to notice and manage before they play out unchecked in the session.

Research on therapist characteristics provides some support for this emphasis on reflective capacity, although the findings are not simple. Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020) found relatively inconsistent evidence for broad personal characteristics as direct predictors of treatment outcome. More promising findings concerned professionally relevant interpersonal capacities, constructive coping with difficulties, and the management of reactions within therapy. For example, strategies such as discussing difficulties with colleagues or supervisors and engaging in self-reflection were associated with more favorable patterns in some studies. At the same time, the review cautions that therapist self-ratings are often weak indicators of actual effectiveness and that many apparent therapist characteristics interact with client, treatment, and contextual factors.

This matters because self-awareness should not turn into a demand that counselors be free of personal problems or difficult emotional reactions. Such an expectation is unrealistic, and it could even push counselors toward concealment rather than reflection. A more workable standard is that counselors notice when personal experiences are influencing their work and respond with the appropriate tools – supervision, consultation, self-care, further training, or personal psychological support when needed. On this view, inner work is an ongoing professional responsibility, not a stage completed before practice begins. It connects professional preparation with the relational qualities examined in the next section, since interpersonal skills work best when counselors can also observe and regulate their own part in the therapeutic process.

4 Characteristics of Effective Counselors

Descriptions of an effective counselor often combine professional competence with qualities such as empathy, warmth, authenticity, curiosity, listening ability, communication, and support for client autonomy. The IU course book presents these characteristics as relevant to the counseling relationship and links empathy in particular with active listening, verbal clarification, and attention to non-verbal communication (Huxtable, 2023). However, a list of desirable traits does not by itself establish which characteristics actually predict better client outcomes. The empirical literature therefore requires a distinction between qualities

that appear intuitively valuable and those that have demonstrated associations with therapeutic processes or outcomes.

4.1 Relational and Interpersonal Capacities

The strongest evidence identified by Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020) concerns professional socio-emotional characteristics rather than broad personality traits. Their systematic review separates relational capacities used in professional work, such as warmth, empathy, persuasiveness, and alliance-related abilities, from more general interpersonal characteristics in therapists' private lives. Across the reviewed studies, observer-rated professional capacities lined up with outcome more consistently than therapists' own ratings of their skills. The practical upshot is that effective counseling may depend less on whether a practitioner sees themselves as empathic or socially skilled, and more on whether clients actually experience those qualities during difficult moments in therapy.

One influential way of assessing such capacities is the Facilitative Interpersonal Skills (FIS) task. In Anderson et al. (2016), prospective therapists responded to eight simulated challenging therapy situations, including confrontational, withdrawn, confused, and controlling client presentations. Independent raters scored ten interpersonal dimensions: warmth and acceptance, empathic accuracy, collaboration, problem focus, interpersonal responsiveness, verbal fluency, emotional expression, persuasiveness, hopefulness, and the avoidance of problematic interpersonal responses. What this list shows is that effective relational functioning is more than being generally kind or supportive; it also means staying responsive under interpersonal pressure and holding a constructive stance when the interaction gets difficult.

The study found that clients assigned to high-FIS therapists reported stronger alliances from the first session, and these alliances continued to improve over the course of treatment. High-FIS therapists also achieved better outcomes on several symptom and functioning measures than low-FIS therapists. Anderson et al. (2016) therefore provide evidence that observable relational abilities may influence both the therapeutic alliance and client outcomes. Nevertheless, these findings should not be interpreted as establishing a fixed set of universally effective traits. The FIS task measures performance in standardized simulated situations, and the study involved a small number of doctoral-student therapists and a relatively unusual client sample, which limits direct generalization to routine counseling practice.

4.2 Evidence for Counselor Effects and Effectiveness

The broader review by Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020) supports the existence of therapist differences while also showing how hard they are to pin on simple personal characteristics. Across 31 studies, the traits most clearly tied to client outcomes were generally professional qualities bearing directly on the work of psychotherapy. More global characteristics – interpersonal style outside therapy, attachment-related variables, mindfulness, resilience, and other personal resources – tended to show weaker, inconsistent, or

interaction-dependent relationships with outcome. So the useful question is less what type of person makes a good counselor, and more how personal capacities get expressed within professional therapeutic work.

The review also points to a measurement problem: perceived competence and demonstrated competence are not the same thing. Therapists' self-rated skillfulness and private-life social skills showed weak or inconsistent associations with outcome, whereas externally rated professional socio-emotional capacities – empathy, warmth, positive communication, and handling of criticism – predicted outcome more consistently across several studies (Heinonen & Nissen-Lie, 2020). That is a good reason to build observation, feedback, and supervision into counselor development, rather than leaning on practitioners' confidence in their own abilities.

Counselor effectiveness also should not collapse into a single performance score. Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020) note substantial heterogeneity across the studies in treatment approach, duration, samples, measurement methods, and statistical analysis, and they add that therapist variables often interact with client characteristics and treatment conditions. A relational quality that helps in one context may matter less, or need expressing differently, in another. Warmth, directness, or emotional expressiveness, for instance, may land differently depending on the client, therapeutic model, culture, and stage of treatment. The evidence is strongest, then, for the idea that effective counselors hold adaptable professional interpersonal capacities, not for a universal personality profile that guarantees good outcomes.

5 Biases, Personal Challenges, and Their Management

Counselors do not enter therapeutic relationships without personal histories, values, assumptions, or emotional reactions. These influences may remain subtle, but they can shape how a counselor interprets a client's behavior, which topics receive attention, and how the counselor responds to disagreement or discomfort. The IU course book recognizes this problem directly by noting that counselors may work with clients whose ethical or moral values differ from their own and that professional practice requires them to remain non-judgmental and work within ethical guidelines (Huxtable, 2023). The same text links self-awareness with recognizing personal strengths, weaknesses, limitations, and areas in need of development. Bias management therefore begins with the recognition that complete neutrality is unrealistic.

Cultural differences make this issue especially important. Soto et al. (2018) describe multicultural competence through three linked dimensions: awareness, knowledge, and skills. Awareness includes recognizing the counselor's own cultural background and the assumptions or biases that may color work with clients from different backgrounds. Knowledge concerns the experiences and norms of different groups, and skills involve adapting assessment or treatment to the client's needs. Cultural competence, on this account, is not just a matter of knowing facts about particular groups; it also asks counselors to examine how their own perspective enters the counseling process.

A major difficulty is that counselors may overestimate their own competence. Soto et al. (2018) note that therapist self-report measures can be influenced by social desirability and may capture perceived self-efficacy rather than demonstrated ability with diverse clients. In their meta-analysis, client-rated multicultural competence was substantially more strongly associated with treatment outcomes than therapist self-ratings. Client ratings can also be influenced by the overall therapy experience, so they are not an objective gold standard. The more defensible conclusion is that cultural competence should be evaluated through multiple perspectives rather than assumed from professional confidence alone.

Personal emotional difficulties can create similar risks. Counselors may experience frustration, dislike, anxiety, over-identification, or a strong wish to rescue particular clients. Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020) found that negative personal reactions and avoidant coping were associated with poorer outcomes in some studies, whereas more constructive responses, including self-reflection, consultation with colleagues, supervision, and direct problem-solving with the client, were associated with more favorable patterns. The findings were not fully consistent across experience levels and treatment settings, which is important because it would be misleading to assume that the presence of a difficult emotional reaction automatically makes a counselor ineffective. The more relevant issue is how the reaction is recognized and managed.

Several strategies can therefore help reduce the impact of bias and personal difficulties. Regular self-reflection can help counselors identify recurring assumptions or triggers, while supervision and consultation provide an external perspective when self-assessment is insufficient. The IU course book also identifies supervision and personal psychological support as appropriate responses when professional or emotional strain becomes difficult to manage (Huxtable, 2023). In culturally diverse work, Soto et al. (2018) additionally emphasize seeking the client's perspective, adapting communication and treatment when appropriate, and remaining attentive to the client's cultural meanings and experiences.

Bias management, then, is an ongoing reflective and relational process, not a point at which a counselor finally becomes perfectly objective. Enough self-awareness to question one's assumptions and emotional responses is necessary, but on its own it is not enough. Because practitioners can misjudge their own competence, external feedback, supervision, client perspectives, and continued learning act as safeguards. This is also part of why the idea of an "effective counselor" needs handling with care: effectiveness turns not only on the counselor's individual characteristics, but on how those characteristics meet particular clients and therapeutic contexts.

6 Critical Discussion: Limits of the "Effective Counselor" Ideal

The evidence reviewed so far supports the counselor's importance as a professional and relational participant, yet it does not license a fixed profile of the "effective counselor." Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020) found that the traits most consistently tied to outcomes were generally expressed within professional therapeutic work, while broader personal characteristics showed weaker or context-dependent

relationships. The value of any single quality also shifts with treatment type, client characteristics, culture, and the particular counselor-client pairing. Effectiveness, on this reading, is relational and conditional rather than a stable personal trait.

The evidence base also has methodological limits that restrict strong causal conclusions. Heinonen and Nissen-Lie (2020) identified relatively few studies within individual domains of therapist characteristics, often with modest therapist samples; only 13 of the 31 studies used multilevel modeling to separate therapist and client variability. Across the literature examined in this paper, measures also differ in perspective and method: therapist self-ratings can be biased, client ratings can partly reflect the overall therapy experience, and performance tasks may not capture what occurs in routine sessions. These problems make triangulation across client, observer, and therapist perspectives preferable to relying on a single indicator of competence.

A further limitation is heterogeneity. The reviewed studies span different therapeutic approaches, treatment lengths, practitioner experience levels, client populations, and outcome measures. Findings that look contradictory may therefore reflect real contextual differences rather than a failure to identify the “right” counselor characteristics. On balance, the evidence favors a model of adaptable professional capacity. Training, supervision, self-awareness, interpersonal skill, and attention to bias all matter, but none carries the work alone; professional accountability lies in using these capacities responsively and in noticing when a usual way of working is not helping a particular client.

7 Conclusion

This paper examined how counselors’ professional preparation, personal characteristics, self-awareness, and biases influence the therapeutic relationship and the quality of counseling. The evidence does not let formal training, theoretical orientation, or personality explain effectiveness on their own. Counselors contribute through professional responsibility, relational skill, reflective capacity, and the ability to adapt their work to the needs and context of individual clients.

Professional preparation provides the ethical, theoretical, and practical basis for practice, while inner work helps counselors recognize reactions, limitations, values, and possible biases that may shape the therapeutic process. The most consistent empirical findings concern relational capacities expressed within professional work, including empathy, warmth, responsiveness, collaboration, and constructive management of difficult interactions. Because self-perception is an imperfect indicator of competence, supervision, feedback, client perspectives, and continued professional development are important complements to self-awareness.

An effective counselor, then, is best understood as a reflective and adaptable professional rather than a particular personality type. That conclusion stays provisional: the literature is heterogeneous, several areas rest on small therapist samples or single-perspective measures, and counselor characteristics keep interacting with client and treatment factors. Larger multilevel studies that combine client ratings, observer

assessments, and therapist reports across different treatment contexts would let professional development follow the evidence, without collapsing counseling effectiveness into a fixed checklist.

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