

How to Have Your Cake and Eat It Too: *Counselling in Private Practice from Home*

Irene E.M. Paton

Abstract

This study used a national survey to determine a profile of working as a counsellor in private practice from a home base. The findings indicated that working from home is perceived as having few disadvantages and many advantages to both counsellors and clients. Working from home was found to be connected to both moving away from other alternatives as well as moving towards the advantages of working from home. Other findings included the need for experience working in a more supported environment before working privately, skill in managing the business and financial aspects, and the need to consider how the work setting within the home environment defines the identity of the counsellor. Information from this study will be used to write a set of guidelines for those considering working as a counsellor in private practice from a home base.

Introduction

This paper explores facets of working in private practice as a counsellor from a home base. Limited attention has been given to this in the literature. Paton (1999) identified early studies on private practice using survey methodologies. Although there have been some relevant studies (Barranco, 1990; Christensen, 1994; Priesnitz, 1989) considering working in other fields from a home-based environment, there were only two articles (Carsley, 1995; Pennington, 2005) on counsellors working in this way.

It is important to connect data-gathering in 1996 with the context of private practice at that time, because this was a time of growth of counselling in general and, in particular, opportunities for the development of private practice. Research about social workers moving into private practice by Van Heugten and Daniels (2001) found that private practice in New Zealand grew in the mid-1980s with the increase in free-market philosophies and right-wing government policies. They identified two factors that influenced social workers to find alternatives to “organisational employment”; one was the restructuring of government policies, and the other was the availability of third party payments for counselling. Miller (2001) also found that there were many

new opportunities for counselling in private practice as a result of the growth in employee-assistance programmes and government funding rearrangements, e.g. Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), Family Courts and the Disability Allowance of the Social Welfare Department. She traced the significant growth in members of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) to 2000, and the resultant need to put on hold applications for membership in order to review the standards and criteria for membership.

In discussing the magnitude of home-based work of all types, Armstrong (1992, p. 34) suggested that there would be an increase in home-based work in line with overseas trends. The focus of her study was on home working and gender relations. The statistics support this view, with 3.8% of New Zealand workers indicating in 1986 that they were involved in home-based work (Loveridge & Schoeffel, 1991). In the latest census (2001), the figure was 5.1% (88,782 people) and of those 1341 indicated that they worked as Life Science and Health Professionals. Commenting on research carried out on women and home-based work in the US, Christensen (1994, p. 163) stated: "Several political forces are converging to create a very favourable political climate for work at home."

Christensen (1994, p. 136) found that working successfully from home "requires a mutually enhancing configuration of space, time, social relations and self-identity". She conceived these frameworks "as organized, and organizing structure of meaning" rather than as mutually interdependent parts. By "self-identity", Christensen referred to role identity, that is, the fact that how one thinks about oneself affects one's ability to structure the physical and social environment in ways necessary to support the demands of that identity (p. 161).

With counselling, boundaries (a framework that defines the roles and the process which distinguishes counselling from any other relationship; the content of counselling; and the structural elements of time, place and money) form an important part of the work. Pennington (2005, p. 12) states: "Just as important as making your scope of practice clear is establishing and upholding your boundaries." This is even more significant when working from home as it is more difficult to establish and maintain those boundaries if the counsellor is not clear about their role from the perspectives identified by Christensen (1994). Establishing clear and effective work boundaries needs to be considered from the perspectives of both the clients and the other people living in the house. Christensen emphasised that no home-based office, no matter how well designed and situated it is, will be effective unless it is well integrated into the social dynamics of the household. "In turn, a well-structured environment, one that is well designed and socially regulated, will further strengthen one's identity;

a poorly structured environment will further undercut how one thinks of oneself” (p. 160).

Method

Information for this study was gained from a 1996 survey of members of NZAC who were in private practice. The questionnaires were originally sent to 511 people, and 260 respondents (return rate 51.4%) completed the first section. This section was analysed in a previous study (Paton, 1999). The working from home section was completed by 125 (48.5%) respondents. It includes counselling work experience, factors influencing choice of working from home, the benefits and disadvantages of this way of working, information about gaining and maintaining clients, the personal characteristics necessary to work in this way, the boundaries between professional and private space, protection for oneself and one’s clients, the impact on other people living in the house, self-care issues, clients who may be unsuitable for being seen in this setting, and intentions for future work.

Deciding how to analyse the data was a critical step and in the end an interpretivist paradigm (meaning a descriptive, subjective perspective, concerned with understanding multiple realities and disputing universal truths) was adopted. This provided a way to treat the open-ended data in both quantitative and qualitative ways, as appropriate.

Interestingly, some respondents included feedback about the survey that was appreciative and encouraging of the researcher. Many also expressed interest in the results and commented on the value gained from being a respondent in terms of considering aspects of their practice that they had not previously focused on.

General information

While this paper focuses on working as a counsellor from a home base, some of the information has some applicability to working in private practice generally.

There was a significant difference in the gender split of the sample, with only 14% of respondents being male, a sharp contrast to the 51% of males in the 2001 statistics who indicated they worked from home in the category of Life Science and Health Professionals. The distribution of age range and income was as follows:

Table 1: Age and income of counsellors working from home

Age (years)	%	Income (\$)	%
30–39	14	<10,000	23
40–44	15	10–20,000	21
45–49	22	20–30,000	24
50–54	17	30–40,000	15
55–59	21	40–50,000	12
60–64	8	50–60,000	5
65–69	3		

Counselling work experience

This is an important factor in predicting the success of working in private practice from home. Experience in working in an “agency” setting before working from home provides the containment and safety for counsellors in the initial stages of the post-training period. It can also help the networking process. The recommended amount of time in an agency varies. McMahon and Powell (1993, p. 152) suggested that two to three years’ experience is sufficient for offering a limited range of counselling services to a specific group, whereas five years is suggested for coping with most clients and most client problems. Table 2 shows the time the current sample of counsellors spent working in the counselling field before beginning to work from home and the total time spent in private practice from home. There is some concern about the number of respondents who are working from a home base with less than two years’ experience before starting to work in this way.

Table 2: Years as a counsellor and time spent working from home

Years as a counsellor	%	Years spent counselling from home	%
No time	12	<-2	20
<1/2–2	10	2–5	40
2–5	27	5–10	30
>5	51	>10	10

Factors influencing choice of work space

Priesnitz (1989) found the main reasons for choosing to have a home-based business were: to be with children (45%); flexible hours (30%), low overheads and tax deductions (25%). Other reasons included a more comfortable and relaxed environment, fewer distractions, avoidance of office politics and lack of travelling time. In this study the reasons given for choosing this setting were financial advantages (27%), convenience (24%) and what the particular setting offered both the client and the counsellor (13%). Others noted the lack of travel time as an important consideration. Another reason for three respondents was that there was no other choice of working environment at the time, especially in rural areas.

The power of the modelling provided by the counsellor in working from this location is clear in these quotes:

Normalises life difficulties. Home enables a focus on well-being, e.g. focusing on inadequacies and limitations when sitting in waiting room of clinical environments (Resp. 222).

Wish to model counselling that valued family and community relationships. Getting older and wanting to focus energy on the client contact not all the administrative and time-wasting garbage that organisations generate (Resp. 250).

This highlights the opportunities in working from home for greater congruency of the counsellor with the work setting. On the flipside, as another respondent suggests, there is the possibility that someone who works from home and is not suited to this environment (because they might not be able to switch off from work, feel anxious about working alone or are not able to assertively set boundaries between home and work) is going to experience more stress and the incongruity could reduce their effectiveness.

Benefits

The results of the present study support the findings of Courtois (1992, p. 19) who found that counselling psychologists derived “great personal and professional satisfaction” from working at home and said that it offered a wide range of opportunities to work with differing clients and problems. Twenty-four percent of the psychologists identified freedom and 37% named flexibility as benefits.

It is interesting to note that in comparison to the responses to the factors influencing the choice of setting, the emphasis was much more on the benefits of moving towards this way of working, rather than on the benefits of moving away from other ways of working.

Able to work the way I want to with philosophical and ethical integrity (Resp. 121).

Being a sharper professional, less complacent, more confident and refreshed (Resp. 258).

Availability for family responsibilities, the ability to control the environment, and to create privacy, peace and serenity were also named.

Disadvantages

While Priesnitz (1989) found the list of disadvantages to be long, this study did not support this trend. Four percent indicated there were no disadvantages, and the other respondents noted disadvantages that formed clear themes, the most notable being lack of peer contact and support (48%), isolation and working alone (30%) and financial fluctuations and insecurity (23%). Both Buckner (1992) and Courtois (1992) reported the loneliness due to the isolation of the setting and feeling “overburdened with questioning her competence and knowledge base as well as business and professional issues” (Courtois, 1992, p. 18).

A temptation towards inertia, keeping the business books (Resp. 66).

Other disadvantages included: “no work no pay”; no sick or holiday pay; unpaid time spent writing reports; cost of training; becoming known, and marketing. Having an alternative source of income in the early stage was suggested as a way of managing the financial disadvantage. The susceptibility to overwork and burn-out were noted by 11% of the respondents. The following quote captures some of the challenging aspects of working in this way:

Stress – multiplicity of functions, lack of colleagues – needing to work hard to form networks, a lot of gift work (Resp. 190).

There was no evidence of Priesnitz’s (1989) findings of the tendency to become side-tracked by household tasks, a lack of a dedicated space for the business, lack of visibility, lack of suitable client marketing space, the need to juggle family and work lives and lack of credibility from friends and family, late night or weekend calls, and restrictive zoning by-laws.

Getting clients

To be successful, it is important to have a variety of methods of establishing a home-based practice. However, the way of getting started may not need to include having:

a marketing professional who developed a strategy including targeting client groups (Resp. 65).

Pennington (2005) advised that in the first year of self-employment, a large percentage of time is needed on self-promotion. The findings of Mutter (1997, p. 18), which showed that counsellors initially relied on advertising and word of mouth as the main sources of clients, have been supported by this study, with 29% citing word of mouth and 11% advertising. Mutter suggests that Yellow Pages advertisements are a must, as well as smaller community or regional telephone books, and newsletters for groups. She emphasised the need to have the same advertisement in the same place in the publication every time. Buckner (1992, p. 15) suggests “an up-to-date referral file is a vital tool”.

This study has produced a comprehensive list of possibilities, starting with:

Lots of hitting the pavement – introducing myself personally (Resp. 30).

In addition, visiting doctors (27% indicated this), agencies, schools, community centres, social workers, ministers, pastors and priests, government departments, women’s refuge, dentists, public health nurses, other alternative health practitioners, hairdressers, health food stores, Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB), other practitioners, psychiatrists, paediatricians, Plunket nurses, local agencies, alcohol and drug centres and mental health teams, and the Department of Social Welfare were named. Some sent letters of introduction, brochures and business cards then followed this up with a visit, and found this was more effective than sending material out without the personal contact.

Only three respondents mentioned radio advertisements, whereas advertising in the Yellow Pages was the most commonly used method.

Yellow Page ad brings three to ten inquiries a week (Resp. 76).

Publications of counsellors, e.g. Lifeline and NZAC directories, community networks, were other options, along with using posters in other agencies, information sheets at libraries, medical centres and in letterbox drops, giving resource kits to key people, and being willing to work extra hours or outside regular hours. Brochures were being used by 52% of the respondents, and they were said to be useful to send to clients who make telephone contact and want more information.

Referrals came from colleagues, friends, workmates, educational work, supervisors, church affiliations, and agencies of training. Support from experienced counsellors already successfully operating a practice who pass on their overflow of clients has been found to be an important source of new clients by the researcher. Bringing an existing

case-load from previous agency work was identified in the study, but this may be problematic if there is a clause in their contract that prohibits this practice.

Clients can also be obtained from running courses, writing articles for newspapers, through association with local NZAC meetings, doing group work in the local community, doing voluntary work for agencies (e.g. Rape Crisis), speaking at Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, schools, Lions, playcentres and kindergartens.

Raised profile with 3 x 2-hour free lectures as a fundraiser with local Plunket group after 3 months – too busy to do anymore! (Resp. 29).

Finally, the importance of negotiating Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) contracts or becoming a provider of EAP services and getting accepted by ACC, the Family Court and the Children and Young Persons Service (CYPS) were emphasised in this study. Because the latter are national organisations, this provides the opportunity to set up a practice in a different area if the counsellor shifts.

Maintaining client numbers

To help maintain a viable caseload, Mutter (1997, p. 20) maintains a high profile in her community, by writing for a newspaper column, serving on committees, and being an active member in professional associations. She suggests it paid off for her to be generous with her time and services and to contribute to community events, e.g. prizes at charity events. From this study it appears that 96% of respondents maintain client loads easily, with the most common methods being through word of mouth (39%) and delivering quality service (15%). They also have additional ways of doing this: by sending a written acknowledgement to every referral; keeping an ad in the Yellow Pages; producing fast, efficient and sensitive reports; giving business cards to existing clients; operating a waiting list; attending professional training/meetings; radio and magazine advertising; keeping in touch with referees; by informing others of availability; having cards at Women's Health Collective centres; writing articles and poetry for publication, and advertisements in professional newsletters. The following quote describes useful strategies in the early stages of private practice:

Basically, I have established a good reputation, charge reasonable fees, ensure that I am available within a week of people enquiring, and am prepared to negotiate appointment times and fees (Resp. 228).

There was some evidence in support of the words of advice from Mutter (1997): "Letting go, relaxing and enjoying my work and my clients seems to be my formula for a consistent, flourishing practice" (p. 20). For some counsellors this is more likely

to happen without the pressures of the “agency” to grapple with.

Being successful in maintaining client numbers also requires both clinical skills and entrepreneurial and business desire. Pennington (2005, p. 12) refers to “success teams”; which are people who can perform tasks the counsellor may not do well and people who can provide “peer support, referrals and inspiration”.

Personality characteristics

In analysing the personality characteristics of those in private practice the focus was on those characteristics that were particularly relevant to private practice from a home base. The importance of “maturity, responsibility and the ability to make decisions and to handle stress” (Courtois, 1992, p. 22) has been found in this study, although less than the researcher had thought would occur. This was also evident in the findings of Mutter (1997, p. 20) who identified the importance of optimism and risk taking. In this study 6% referred to the former and 4% to the latter. This study did support the newspaper article of Fifield (2001) with regard to the need for self-motivation (18%), but not the need for assertiveness (6%). The most common themes for this study were independence (35%), confidence (24%), being well-organised (16%), sense of humour (10%), integrity (10%) and flexibility (10%). The following response captures these traits well:

Integrity and ethical awareness, safety. Flexibility and openness to differences. Phlegmatic – remains calm and attuned no matter what! Can work independently while retaining good collegial consultative practices (i.e. for safety and development). Sense of humour, patience, diplomacy, entrepreneurial (networking) skills. Overall a clear awareness of professionalism and good boundaries (e.g. know limits and when to refer) (Resp. 8).

Maintaining boundaries between professional and home space

Because of the impact on clients, the practitioner and others living in the house where the practice is located, the arrangements for working from home are very important. The definition of space given by Christensen (1994, p. 139) as the “macrogeography of the home, including the spatial configuration of the rooms and the microgeography of the individual work space, through which and by which women give physical definition to their work and communicate that meaning to their family or colleagues” is useful. In this study, the configuration of work space was presented in five options: a separate space not attached to your home, but located on the same section as your home (14%); a work space attached to your home which has a separate entrance and is the

only area of your home that clients are part of (39%); a work space that clients have to move through the home to get to (19%); a work space that is also used as a home space (15%); different to the choices listed (13%). Other ways the personal and professional boundaries can be determined are having a separate entrance for clients (52%), having a separate toilet for clients (31%) and having a separate waiting room (27%).

Given that telephone contact is the most likely initial contact from clients, it is important to consider the comment by Barranco (1990, p. 41), who works as a lawyer. Her insecurity about the office location was illustrated by handling phone calls (giving her direct home number and then being deluged with business calls at all hours) when working from a home base after having used an answering service when she was working in a non-home-based workplace. Personal and professional roles can be more clearly defined by separating phone lines, and in this study 48% of respondents used two separate lines or answer machines as a way of maintaining boundaries.

As Christensen (1994, p. 139) suggests: "The more the self and the members of her family agree about her roles and her work, the easier it will be to reconfigure the physical and social meanings of the home." One respondent (21) maintained the differentiation of her role by:

... carrying the briefcase with me downstairs to the practice rooms. Carrying the briefcase is the professional tool.

Home-based work spaces with a clear separation from the "personal" space are more desirable as they enable those who live in the personal space to avoid overlapping into the work space and compromising the confidentiality of the client. From the client's perspective, it is assumed that the clearer the boundaries, the greater the sense of professionalism and safety.

Protecting counsellor and clients

Eighty-seven percent indicated they had a security system, e.g. a panic alarm; 71% said they had loss of earnings insurance, and 42.5% that they had clinical back-up (other colleagues who they could ask for support and refer clients to) during work-time. Many other examples were given of ways practitioners protect themselves and their clients. The most common one was only seeing clients they know and can trust, and having someone else in the house while working. In terms of arrangements during holiday times, most practitioners identified giving advanced notice and giving numbers of colleagues and other community contacts in case of emergency.

Impact of working from home on other people who live in the house

Although “others” in the home were not consulted directly, 92% of the counsellors described the impact on their family as either positive or negligible. For the 8% who identified difficulties, they included other family members needing to alter their behaviour (e.g. be quiet, intrusion of phone calls). Sixteen percent of counsellors either lived on their own or there was only one other adult living in the house. One respondent’s comment about family members expressing “some jealousy – seen as not really working” (Resp. 94) has the potential to undervalue working in this environment and highlights the fact that not all family members will be supportive or accepting of counselling from home.

Handling professional isolation

Only one respondent indicated they experienced isolation, with their only contact being with their supervisor. All of the others used the same methods for handling isolation as Courtois (1992) who dealt with the concerns by developing an informal network with other professionals in practice in her community and using continuing education and supervision; having “a satisfying personal life is a priority”. The results of this study confirm the finding of Priesnitz (1989) who found that support of husbands and other family members can be critical to the success of a home-based business. In this study attendance at NZAC meetings, networking, and meeting informally with therapist friends were also seen as important.

Self-care issues

From existing literature it appears the main drawback to working from home is that it is too convenient and fosters workaholism, or as Fifield (2001) said, “not knowing when to stop working”. Barranco (1990, p. 42) indicated: “You must take vacations and close the office door at night and on weekends. Otherwise, all the effort you make to develop a quality private life will be wasted, and you will quickly change from a spirited advocate of your clients’ causes to a burned-out shell.” Surprisingly, no one in this study referred to the risk of working too hard.

Christensen (1994, p. 140) indicated that “higher levels of predictability and control lead to greater satisfaction in working at home than do lower levels”. This is particularly important when working as a counsellor from home, and many respondents indicated limiting both hours worked each day and days of the week. This was also suggested by Courtois (1992, p. 19) who emphasised the need to monitor “what constitutes a comfortable caseload and to avoid overload and role conflict”. She also emphasised the

need to manage the level of stress by determining policies and procedures, and to carefully balance limit setting with maintaining appropriate levels of professional accessibility. Mutter (1997, p. 19) also scheduled only three to four appointments a day and also subleases her office one day a week.

Although it was not possible to find any reference to this in the literature, mention was made in this study about “cleansing” the environment and the self. For example:

I burn incense or essential oils for cleansing (Resp. 36).

I have a ritual ceremony for opening of practice in workroom (Resp. 4).

Shutting my door and saying a little ritual at the end of the day. Never use counselling room for any other function (Resp. 247).

I wash when finished work – shower if necessary. Change clothes (Resp. 5).

This may be more important when working from home, as the energy created by the “work” is transferable more easily to the home space, compared to counsellors who have the opportunity to dissipate this impact as they travel between spaces.

Clients who are unsuitable for this setting

Writing about her practice of working as a criminal lawyer from a home base, Barranco (1990, p. 41) indicated that she was initially worried about preserving her personal privacy and security as well as her professional image, because most of her clients were charged with serious crimes. In this study 5% indicated there were no clients who they thought would be unsuitable. Respondents identified the reasons for the unsuitability of clients as either their safety as counsellors or uncertainty about their suitability to work with the client, in particular clients who may need a more structured or contained environment. Particular responses focused on the unsuitability of clients who are violent (52%) and those who may be psychiatrically or mentally unstable (19%). Counsellors who do Family Court work, especially Section 29A reports (where recommendations are made about custody and access matters) are particularly vulnerable to adverse reactions from clients who may not like the recommendations made in the report. The suggestion of one respondent (Resp. 11), that, “It might be an unsuitable setting. I doubt that there are unsuitable clients,” influenced the researcher to question the discourse attached to the question in privileging the unsuitability of clients without considering the possibility of the location being the unsuitable factor.

Intentions for future work

Almost half of the respondents indicated that they intended to continue to work from home indefinitely; 29% saw this as a permanent option; 14% as a temporary choice; 4% were not intending to continue to work from home, and 4% did not know. Although there were many reasons for moving to another location, only three focused on the lack of professionalism in working from home. Greene (2004) says that home businesses have never been easier to start than they are now, and that although they may have faced prejudice in the past they are now gaining acceptance. This is supported by the development of the Telecom (2004) Newsletter for Home Business for the person working from home. In this they offer their products, advise about working from home and list some useful websites, including www.homebizbuzz.co.nz, which has very useful financial and legal information.

Conclusion

This study has provided a useful perspective from which to view the provision of counselling from a home base. It suggests that to be successful requires many considerations. Ease of integrating a number of different roles (business and clinical) is important, due to the multiplicity of the functions required of the practitioner. The congruency of these roles, prior experience working in the field in a more “structured” environment, having an alternative source of income in the early stages and creating clear boundaries between the work and home spaces are also important. The study has outlined some ways of managing the risks and disadvantages, some useful ways of establishing and maintaining a practice, and identified personality characteristics that enhance the possibility of success. It is envisaged that this could be used to produce some guidelines and a checklist for people considering working in this way.

The changing culture around working from home may make this choice easier in the future, in terms of both the respectability of this choice, and the resources available to support this way of working.

Future research could focus on the impact on working from a home base of the possibility of counsellor registration and the development and use of websites. It would be interesting to obtain the views of clients and also receive feedback from other people living in the home environment about the impact on them. Knowing the time taken to establish a “secure” practice would also be useful.

With the development of email, the researcher has identified an easier way to gather data in the future, as it requires considerable determination and perseverance to operate a busy private practice and undertake meaningful research.

For the profession it is important to have more reliable and meaningful research in

the counselling field and support for those practitioners who want to pursue research within the context of their clinical work. It would also be interesting to consider the profession's role in terms of accountability to clients and whether policy statements and specific standards regarding working from a home base need to be implemented.

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