What is Counselling?

Creating a definition of counselling is surprisingly difficult. The major challenge is to distinguish a specific use of counselling for human development and therapy from the more general use of the term in everyday life where ‘counselling’ is widely used, sometimes in ill-defined and contradictory ways. Counselling is a fashionable feature of contemporary life and as a consequence there is an ever-growing list of examples of how the label has been co-opted for many purposes. In its everyday usage ‘counselling’ is non-specific. The meaning can range from simply listening to someone in the spirit of a ‘problem shared is a problem halved’ to giving authoritative advice: ‘I counselled him to return to work as the longer he puts it off, the harder it will be.’ Sometimes ‘counselling’ can be a thinly veiled method of selling products, as in ‘fashion counselling’ or ‘double glazing counsellor’. ‘Debt counselling’ ranges from almost fraudulent selling of unsuitable financial products to desperate people to highly professional and impartial help in managing financial difficulties. In these examples, the meaning has to be inferred from the context in which the term is being used. There are also examples of the use of ‘counselling’ where the term has taken on a very narrow and technically specific meaning. ‘Counselling’, in some disciplinary proceedings, represents ‘a serious talking to about the need to change behaviour’ as a form of oral warning which is the precursor of a written warning or dismissal. In this context, the interpersonal dynamics are both judgemental and authoritative. Counselling can also mean imparting expert advice in an authoritative manner, such as ‘I counselled him to watch for problems
with ... but did he pay any attention?’ Counselling is not a fixed term with an established meaning. There is always the potential for two people using the term to misunderstand each other because they are using it in different ways. The existence of such a variety of meanings in everyday use makes it a problematic term to apply to a significant and rapidly developing professional role.

In this chapter I intend to examine a range of approaches to defining counselling. Identifying these approaches sets the context considered by this book. Establishing an agreed meaning is important to establishing the boundaries of what activities are included within, and what activities are excluded from, the ethics and standards of counselling.

For example, when a pupil approaches a tutor for help with a personal problem, or when a nurse listens to a patient’s worries about being away from home, is counselling taking place? When a social worker assists parents preparing for the return of their children from residential care, or when a priest helps someone who has been recently bereaved, is counselling taking place? Or is it some other activity, perhaps subject to different standards of practice and ethics?

Even within the field of counselling covered by this book, there are wider and narrower definitions.

**The Meaning of ‘Counselling’ Internationally**

At the international level there is a definite tendency to make the term ‘counselling’ all-encompassing, in order to accommodate a diversity of cultures and practice. In languages where there is no equivalent to ‘counselling’, often the terms ‘guidance’ or ‘advice’ act as an equivalent. Alternatively, the term ‘counselling’ is simply imported into the vocabulary of the language. The International Association for Counselling (IAC) (incorporating the Round Table for the Advancement of Counselling (IRTAC)), which is recognized by the United Nations as a non-governmental organization, uses an all-encompassing definition that can be adapted to different national and social contexts. The determination to encompass diversity in order to encourage contextually appropriate practice is counterbalanced by identifying the purpose of counselling. The tensions between being internationally inclusive and establishing a shared professional identity appears to be carefully balanced in this definition:
The term ‘counselling’ has many meanings according to its cultural and professional context. Nonetheless it is possible to identify a definition that encompasses this diversity.

Counselling may be described as a profession of relating and responding to others with the aim of providing them with opportunities to explore, clarify and work towards living in a more personally satisfying and resourceful way. Counselling may be applied to individuals, couples, families or groups and may be used in widely differing contexts and settings. (IAC, 2003)

The close relationship between counselling and guidance in many countries is acknowledged:

Whereas the counselling is primarily non-directive and non-advisory, some situations require positive guidance by means of information and advice. (Hoxter, 1998)

This wording, by the late founder of IAC, simultaneously suggests a distinction between counselling and guidance while seemingly validating advice and guidance in a way which suggests that they might be incorporated within some approaches of counselling. This ambiguity reflects the practical realities of counselling world-wide, where it can take a considerable variety of forms according to the cultural context and purpose for which counselling is being used.

In the modern world, cultural diversity does not simply exist between nations but also within countries as people migrate or relocate following conflict in their place of origin or are taken over by a different nationality or ethnic group.

The most recent statement about the criterion for membership of the American Counseling Association (formerly the American Association of Counseling and Development – note spelling of ‘Counseling’ with one ‘l’ in American usage) is as broad as that of any international association, but has a strong multicultural focus:

Association members are dedicated to the enhancement of human development throughout the lifespan. Association members recognize diversity and embrace a cross-cultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts. (ACA, 2005)
The first part of this definition probably constitutes one of the widest definitions of counselling in current use. An earlier statement acknowledged the difficulty posed by using such a wide definition in setting standards.

The Association recognizes that the role definitions and work settings of its members include a wide variety of academic disciplines, levels of academic preparation, and agency services. This diversity reflects the breadth of the Association’s interest and influence. It poses challenging complexities in efforts to set standards for the performance of members, desired requisite preparation or practice, and supporting social, legal and ethical controls. (AACD, 1988)

The counselling movement in the USA is probably further ahead in providing multicultural counselling than is currently the case in the British Isles. It may be that the current approach to the definition of counselling is more of an obstacle than an asset in developing a stronger multicultural base for counselling. The use of all-encompassing definitions by international and more multiculturally developed counselling organizations seems to point to this conclusion. However, there may be other more significant factors that explain the slow development of a multicultural dimension to counselling on this side of the Atlantic. It is probably fair to say that the development of definitions of counselling in Britain has been more concerned about role differentiation and highlighting distinctive aspects of counselling that could well be overwhelmed unless entrenched within a definition.

‘Counselling’ in Britain

Within Britain there is a long-established use of the term ‘counselling’ in its wider meaning. Stephen Murgatroyd (1985) regards the professionalization of counselling by training and certification as the prerequisite of a select few working in specialist roles. However, in his view, the strategies used in counselling should not be confined to these select few. He argues in favour of deprofessionalizing counselling in order to make its methods available to as many different people as possible. Counselling and helping are therefore synonymous. Philip Burnard (2006) reaches a similar view about the meaning of the term ‘counselling’, but offers a different explanation for doing so which arises from his
experience of working in the health service. As a nurse tutor, he was concerned to discover that nurses are reluctant to use facilitative skills with patients. This is not merely a matter of skills but of an attitude and a belief that the nurse knows best, or at least better than the patient. This is contrary to the growing practice of involving patients in decisions about their own care. Burnard is interested in extending the nurses’ skills to include more facilitative interventions that involve the patient in making decisions for himself about his treatment. He draws on John Heron’s six categories of therapeutic intervention as the underpinning model. Heron (2001) divides the possible interventions into authoritative and facilitative. Authoritative interventions include: prescriptive (offering advice), informative (offering information) and confronting (challenging). Facilitative interventions include: cathartic (enabling expression of pent-up emotions), catalytic (drawing out) and supportive (confirming or encouraging). Burnard concluded that it is desirable for nurses to use the full range of interventions and therefore defines counselling as the effective use of verbal interventions involving ‘both client-centred and more prescriptive counselling’ (his emphasis). He is therefore taking an all-encompassing view of counselling. These debates about whether counselling should develop into a separate profession or is better understood as part of another professional role, such as nursing or teaching, are ongoing. Perhaps the biggest divide is between those who support counselling developing into a regulated profession with its identity entrenched in law and those who see it more as an inclusive social movement committed to maximizing human potential and therefore distinct from the scientific and medical culture of related professions. The debate between a perceived narrowing of counselling to meet a professional agenda and a wider vision of the potential contribution of counselling to society is ongoing on both sides of the Atlantic (Bates and House, 2003).

In contrast to the wider definitions of counselling, there are two narrower definitions in popular use that are mutually exclusive.

The first of these regards counselling as the same as giving advice. This view has a long tradition that reaches back to at least the seventeenth century. In 1625, Francis Bacon, the essayist, wrote ‘The greatest Trust, betweene Man and Man is the Trust of Giving Counsell’. It is a reasonable inference that he is thinking of advice because as he develops his argument he identifies the ‘Inconveniences of Counsell’. These include ‘the Danger of being unfaithfully counselled, and more for the good of
them that counsel than of him that is counselled’. He also states that only people with expertise are suitable to provide ‘counsell’. This use of counsel to mean expert advice is the only definition given in the 1982 edition of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary. Counsel is defined as ‘advise (person to do); give advice to (person) professionally on social problems etc.; recommend (thing, that)’ (Sykes, 1982). This meaning is still actively used in legal and medical circles. When I was working on a report about HIV counselling, a doctor who was committed to this usage wrote to me to express exasperation at all the fuss being made about counselling, which he regarded as merely a ‘popular term for giving advice to people’ (Bond, 1991b). This narrow definition of counselling is valid, but is incompatible with an increasingly prevalent use of the term ‘counselling’ which has a history stretching back at least seventy years. A more recent edition of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary recognizes that a distinction in meaning has developed between ‘counsel’ and ‘counselling’. As a noun, ‘counsel’ retains its historical association with advice-giving and communication of opinion. In contrast, it defines ‘counselling’ as ‘a therapeutic procedure in which a usually trained person adopts a supportive non-judgemental role in enabling a client to deal more effectively with psychological or emotional problems or gives advice on practical problems (Trumble and Stevenson, 2002).

This more modern use of the term has emerged from, and in a reaction against, the traditions of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. It has its origins in the 1920s in the USA. When Carl Rogers started working as a psychologist in America, he was not permitted to practise psychotherapy, which was restricted to medical practitioners. Therefore he called his work ‘counseling’ (Thorne, 1984). However, Carl Rogers was not the inventor of the term. It is widely believed in North America that the originator of ‘counseling’ was a radical social activist. Frank Parsons (1854–1908) was energetic in his condemnation of American capitalism and competition. He advocated the replacement of capitalism with a system of mutualism, a combination of co-operation and concern for humanity. A political activist proposing public ownership of utilities and transportation, the vote for women and a managed currency, he has been called ‘a one man American Fabian Society’ (Gummere, 1988). In 1908, he invented the ‘counseling centre’ when he founded the Vocation Bureau in the North End of Boston, a part of town crowded with immigrants. The centre offered interviews, testing, information and outreach work. It seems that Parsons placed more emphasis on social
action and the importance of the social culture than most modern counsellors. In North America, attention is periodically drawn to the origins of counselling and Frank Parsons, especially when it appears that counselling is in danger of becoming 'overly parochial and perhaps irrelevant' (Zytowski, 1985).

In Britain, the association of counselling with political activism has probably been greatest in the women’s and gay movements. Elsewhere the link is less obvious, but many use counselling to conduct a quiet revolution by drawing attention to the need to humanize education, health care and the essential human qualities of relationships in society. Paul Halmos (1978) pointed out that even tough-minded social scientists might think counsellors are wrong but on the whole they are assessed as having a good influence on society. Insights from counselling and psychotherapy have changed hospital procedures that separated mothers from young children. Counsellors have had a major role in exposing the long-term human suffering caused by the physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children. This quiet revolution is inspired by the counsellor’s faith in the need to love and be loved, and one of the characteristics of most models of counselling is the counsellor’s emotional warmth towards the client or concern for the client’s well-being as the foundation of the counselling relationship. Although counselling has changed since it was first espoused by Frank Parsons, the emphasis has remained on counselling as the principled use of relationship with the aim of enabling the client to achieve his own improved well-being. Two major ethical principles are closely associated with this way of counselling: respect for the client’s capacity for self-determination and the importance of confidentiality. This is the use of the term ‘counselling’ espoused by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

Counselling occurs when a counsellor sees a client in a private and confidential setting to explore a difficulty the client is having, distress they may be experiencing or perhaps their dissatisfaction with life or loss of a sense of direction and purpose. It is always at the request of the client and no one can properly be ‘sent’ for counselling. (BACP, 2008a)

The concluding sentence suggests an ethic which prioritizes respect for the clients’ capacity to make choices for themselves, which has also been variously referred to as ‘self-determination’, ‘autonomy’, ‘self-reliance’ or
‘independence’. The choice of word often depends on personal preferences but the essential meaning is the same. The respect showed to the client’s autonomy is fundamental to counselling as viewed by BACP and acts as the cornerstone of its values, from which the ethical principles are derived and ultimately standards of practice are set.

The definition adopted by the Division of Counselling Psychology in the British Psychological Society reveals a different set of preoccupations which are less concerned about distinguishing between facilitative and authoritative forms of counselling than asserting the place of counselling within psychology. Undoubtedly, this preoccupation reflects the struggle that this division experienced in establishing itself within a professional discipline that previously had been heavily committed to traditional scientific knowledge, often derived from laboratory experiments.

Counselling Psychology is a distinctive profession within psychology with a specialist focus, which links most closely to the allied professions of psychotherapy and counselling. It pays particular attention to the meanings, beliefs, context and processes that are constructed both within and between people and which affect the psychological wellbeing of the person. (BPS, 2008a)

It is probably inevitable that scientific knowledge holds the highest status within many professional bodies and in society in general. It is a type of knowledge that has transformed the world we inhabit by creating new technologies, especially in developed countries. However, the primary focus of counselling is on subjective experience and this requires modifications to existing scientific methods or possibly other approaches to acquiring knowledge. This is reflected in the description of counselling psychology as the basis for guidance on professional practice. ‘Counselling psychology has developed as a branch of professional psychological practice strongly influenced by human science research as well as the principal psychotherapeutic traditions’ (Division of Counselling Psychology, 2007).

**Counselling and Other Roles**

Identifying overlaps and distinctions between counselling and other roles is no longer a concern simply of practitioners. It has become a matter of social policy as government is becoming more interested in
encouraging a systematic approach to the delivery of counselling services in the voluntary and statutory sectors. A major project was sponsored by the Department for Education and Employment to organize a progressive sequence of training for workers offering befriending, advice, guidance and counselling or using counselling skills. This was an ambitious programme involving many people. I was a member of a team concerned with one part of it: role differentiation (Russel et al., 1992). As so often happens, the moment I concentrate on a particular theme, in this case the differences between the roles, the opposite leaps out at me. Despite the well-established arguments that distinguish counselling from advice and other roles, I became conscious of a different perspective on their common roots.

From an historical perspective, the development of befriending, advice, guidance, counselling skills and counselling is strongly associated with movements to enable citizens to become better able to participate in the democratic process and to take control of their own lives. Advice and guidance services have received state funding in response to a series of government reports going back to the 1920s to help people cope with the complex network of benefits and laws that form part of modern society. Befriending has an history in British social welfare which goes back at least as far as 1879 when lay missionaries were appointed by magistrates to advise, befriend and assist offenders, who were often too illiterate to understand court procedures and too poor to afford legal representation in the courts. Befriending has continued to be used to reach out to socially isolated groups of people whose needs are not adequately met within formal social welfare services. Counselling and counselling skills have been adopted not only as methods of problem-solving or therapy, but also to serve other functions. Within education and health services, they are used to help people make informed choices about the options open to them. In this way, the increasing use of counselling and counselling skills in the statutory sector is linked with a shift from viewing the users of services as wholly dependent on the expert providers of services, such as doctors, teachers, social workers, etc., towards enabling the users of those services to participate in decisions about their own future. It seems to me that there is a closer relationship between the roles of advice, guidance, befriending, counselling skills and counselling than I had previously appreciated. More recent additions are advocacy and mediation (Craig, 1998). In different ways, they are all rooted in a movement towards democratizing
society and empowering the individual to exercise control for themselves. In this sense, they all share similar origins and can be regarded as belonging to a single family or ‘genus’ of roles. However, there are also important distinctions to be made between the roles. Metaphorically, if they were to be included in a biological classification, they are separate species within the same genus. Therefore, it is worth considering what is distinctive about each of these roles.

Counselling and Advice

Advice is generally thought of as an opinion given or offered as to future action. It usually entails giving someone information about the choices open to them and then from a position of greater expertise or authority a recommendation as to the best course of action. Rosalind Brooke (1972), writing about Citizens’ Advice Bureaux, describes the advisory process as having two aspects: ‘The advisor not only may interpret the information in order to sort it to the needs of the enquirer, but may also offer an opinion about the wisdom of obtaining a solution in a particular way.’ This description highlights the difficulty ‘advice’ poses for the counsellor. The aim of counselling is to enable the client to discover their own wisdom rather than have wisdom imparted to them by the counsellor. The counselling process is intended to increase the client’s ability to take control rather than depend on another. This difference between counselling and advice does not mean that advice is an inappropriate way of offering help. It is a different method and perhaps more suitable for practical problems than for making decisions about relationships, coping with transitions or other psychosocial issues.

In more recent times advice-giving and counselling have grown closer together in their methods. In an influential discussion paper prepared for the National Association of Young People’s Counselling and Advisory Services, Arthur Musgrave (1991) observed: ‘Most advice work training focuses on content. All too often workers are left to learn what they can of strategies and tactics as they go along.’ He rejected this practice and advocated combining training in advice work with counselling skills. This view is now well established and embedded in how many advisers work, for example in the National Association of Citizens’ Advice Bureaux,
advisers don’t tell clients what to do, but explain their options and
the possible outcomes of different courses of action. Clients are
couraged to make their own decisions and act on their own
behalf. We enable clients to manage their own problems by focusing
on their needs as individuals. (NACAB, 2008)

When advice is delivered in this way by respecting the recipients’ rights
to be actively involved in making choices, it is much closer to the
methods and process of counselling than when it is given authoritatively.

Counselling and Guidance

‘Guidance’ has been used in as many different ways as ‘counselling’.
During the late 1960s and the 1970s, a time when guidance services were
expanding rapidly in social welfare and education, the terms ‘guidance’
and ‘counselling’ could be used interchangeably. Aryeh Leissner (1969),
defined guidance as:

being available for an occasional chat to help a troubled person to
gain some insight and better perspective with regard to relatively
minor problems. It may take the form of more structured short-
term counselling aimed at ‘working through’ some difficulties or
changing certain irrational attitudes. Guidance may also entail the
process of enabling a client to understand the need for referral to
more intensive, specialised treatment services, and to prepare the
client for the referral.

The implication of her definition is that longer-term work of a more
intensive kind would be regarded as ‘therapy’, which is beyond the scope
of guidance or counselling. In her thinking, both guidance and counselling
are a longer form of contact than advice.

It appears that some time since the 1970s, the use of guidance has
developed in two different directions. One trend has emphasized the
kinds of values and methods of working associated with counselling.
This trend is characterized by a very strong emphasis on working in
ways that enable the recipient of guidance to make his own decisions.
In this sense, the guide is like a signpost, pointing out different possible
routes and helping someone to select their own destination and
way of getting there. Information-giving and advising may be more prominent in the worker’s interventions than would be the case in counselling, but the emphasis on values based on the client’s autonomy mean that this form of guidance is very closely related to counselling, and in some instances they are the same kind of activity. This use of ‘guidance’ has become well established in educational settings and is encouraged by many writers and commentators on educational advice, guidance and counselling services (Ali and Graham, 1996; Gothard et al., 2001; Evans, 2008).

An alternative use of ‘guidance’ appears to have developed in reaction against the use of ‘counselling’ to mean ‘non-directive interventions’. In this use, ‘guidance’ is deliberately used to fill the gap left by non-directive counselling in order to validate information-giving and advising. The provider of guidance is therefore more than a signpost but actively indicates the best route and may guide someone along it. For example, I have been told that there has been a struggle within the Department of Health concerning the choice between ‘pre-test counselling’ for HIV antibodies (the indicators of HIV infections and the potential development of AIDS) and ‘pre-test guidance’. This was to escape any confusion about pre-test counselling being directive or non-directive. The policy-makers who wished to substitute the term ‘guidance’ were doing so to indicate that they wanted whoever conducted the pre-test sessions to feel free to offer expert opinion and to guide or direct people towards behaviours which reduce the likelihood of HIV infection. In other words, the realities of HIV infection should be borne in mind by the person conducting the session and they should actively seek to prevent further infection. In practice, the use of ‘counselling’ has prevailed prior to giving someone a medical test for the presence of HIV antibodies because this is considered more appropriate to ensuring that someone has given consent to being tested. The historical associations with counselling as a non-directive intervention have doubtless contributed to this outcome.

Recent developments in services for young people following the Children Act 2004 and the policies known as Every Child Matters (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009) have been so radical that they may have changed the professional landscape for all people involved in these services. The emphasis on integrating services across old professional divisions has also brought information-giving, advising and guidance closer together within a single service. One of the
consequences may be a blurring of boundaries between them as they are brought together under the same umbrella. There are suggestions of this in the following definition of information, advice and guidance:

‘Information, advice and guidance’ is a key element of Local Authority integrated youth support services. It is an umbrella term. It covers a range of activities and interventions that help young people to become more self-reliant and better able to manage their personal and career development, including learning.

It includes:

- the provision of accurate, up-to-date and objective information about personal and lifestyle issues, learning and career opportunities, progression routes, choices, where to find help and advice, and how to access it
- the provision of advice through activities that help young people to gather, understand and interpret information and apply it to their own situation
- the provision of impartial guidance and specialist support to help young people understand themselves and their needs, confront barriers, resolve conflicts, develop new perspectives and make progress
- support for curriculum development [of courses and programmes]. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007)

The bringing together of information, advice and guidance in this way raise the question of what is the appropriate collective term. Within the official literature it tends to be known by the abbreviation IGA, as way of creating a new brand for long-established ways of helping. However, I am sure that there is a need for a term that validates advising and giving information. In the English vocabulary, ‘guidance’ is the obvious candidate. It would reduce some of the confusion over roles if the term ‘guidance’ was used for this purpose. This would mean that ‘non-directive guidance’ would be better known as counselling. As with giving advice, the potential directiveness of guidance is reduced by the use of counselling skills to maximize client choice within the parameters offered by the interviewer. So the use of counselling skills helps to make even a directive form of guidance quite different from merely telling someone what they should, or should not, do.
Counselling and Befriending

The best known of the organizations committed to providing a befriending service is the Samaritans. Chad Varah, their founder, had a strong preference for providing a befriending, rather than counselling, service. He believed that befriending is a role which is more readily understood by callers and one which is more attractive to people who may feel socially isolated and unable to approach people already known to them about their problems. A substitute ‘friend’ has a more powerful appeal in these circumstances than a ‘counsellor’, a term that might be perceived as emphasizing the difference in emotional vulnerability between helper and helped, thereby increasing the sense of the caller’s personal isolation rather than focusing attention on the usefulness of the human relationship.

The use of befriending to counter the social isolation of specific groups of people is a goal shared by all providers of this service. The social isolation may be due to physical circumstances, for example people who are housebound due to illness or disability, or isolated by public attitudes, for example people who are mentally ill or have learning difficulties, the dying, and offenders. National FRIEND is an example of an organization which provides befriending for those who feel set apart by their sexuality and who want the support of people who share similar experiences of being gay, lesbian or bisexual.

As an organization that provides both befriending and counselling services for people affected by HIV or AIDS, the Aled Richards Trust, Bristol (now incorporated in the Terrence Higgins Trust), has had to consider the boundary between these roles. Meg Price, the Co-ordinator of the Buddying Services, wrote to me about how they distinguish between counselling and buddying, the American term for befriending. She observed:

Counselling occurs within the framework of a specific contract – to look at agreed issues, usually one hour sessions on a regular basis, and in a specific setting (usually the counselling room or the client’s home). Whilst Buddies are not trained as counsellors, their role is to listen and to be available at times of particular stress and they may well often be the only person that the client can really talk to and confide in. Buddies, like counsellors, attempt to work in as non-judgmental a way as possible but also have the freedom of a higher level of self-disclosure than have most counsellors. Boundaries are
Counselling and Psychotherapy

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy has long held that it is not possible to make a generally accepted distinction between counselling and psychotherapy. In this respect, it follows well-founded traditions which use the terms interchangeably, in contrast to others which distinguish them.

When the terms ‘counselling’ and ‘psychotherapy’ are used in their widest sense they are the same. On the other hand, these terms are sometimes used to distinguish between two roles. The historical origins of psychotherapy are closely related to attempts to find ways of curing mental illness, especially in the USA (McLeod, 1998). The direct influence of psychoanalytic ideas is more evident in psychotherapy than in counselling. As a consequence, some people have sought to establish clear distinctions between counselling and psychotherapy on the assumption that responding to mental health issues requires working at greater depth (Figure 2.1).

Attempts to distinguish counselling and psychotherapy have proved problematic in the UK. Many people with a psychodynamic background would tend to support the existence of a distinction linked to the history of this approach and a much stronger sense of professional hierarchy through psychodynamic counselling, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Entitlement to progress through the hierarchy and to work in greater depth with clients is linked to levels of training and personal therapy or analysis. Some humanistic approaches to therapy have adopted similarly structured professional hierarchies, such as transactional analysis. These hierarchical approaches to different levels of therapy position counselling as dealing with problems that are primarily pressures from the outside environment, rather than deeply embedded difficulties resulting in rigid neurotic patterns. Counselling is restricted to helping people who have the capacity to cope in most circumstances but who are experiencing
temporary difficulties, or making transitions or adjustments in their life. Issues arising from difficult relationships at home, making decisions, coping with serious illness, bereavement, addiction, etc., may all be within the scope of counselling. If issues are merely symptomatic of something deeper, or the client is experiencing more entrenched problems such as persistent phobias, anxiety states, low self-esteem or difficulty in establishing relationships, then psychotherapy may be more appropriate. This would imply the need for a difference in training and expertise between counsellors and psychotherapists. In my experience, the distinction between counselling and psychotherapy is much harder to establish in the UK than appears to be the case in the USA. This is partly because clients do not present themselves in such neat categories. A seemingly superficial problem in the present may have deeper origins in the past. Sometimes problems arising in the past can be best resolved by communications between people in the present changing long-term patterns of behaviour and distress. Several empirical studies of what counsellors and psychotherapists actually do with their clients have also failed to uncover differences. Perhaps one of the reasons why it is hard to establish a general difference across the professional roles is that practitioners of different therapeutic models disagree profoundly about the desirability of any distinction. It is one of the issues that has divided psychodynamic and person-centred therapists for many years.

In a paper delivered to the 16th Annual Training Conference of the British Association for Counselling (BAC), Brian Thorne (1992) suggested

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<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Counselling</th>
<th>Characteristics of Psychotherapy</th>
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<td>Educational</td>
<td>Reconstructive</td>
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<td>Issues arising from personality</td>
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<td>Conscious awareness</td>
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<td>Emphasis on working with people who do not have severe or persistent emotional problems</td>
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<td>Shorter length of contract</td>
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FIGURE 2.1 *The characteristics of counselling and psychotherapy* (adapted from Brammer and Shostrum, 1982)
that the quest for difference between counselling and psychotherapy is illogical and invalid. He argues that implicit in the kinds of distinctions most frequently made between counselling and psychotherapy is the idea that counselling is concerned with cognitive problems and psychotherapy with affective problems. He debunked this line of argument in the following way:

I would suggest that it takes only a moment’s reflection to reveal the uselessness of such distinctions. Clearly, cognition and affect are both involved in all behaviours. No choice, for example, can ever be simply logical and rational. What is more, a serious personality problem usually brings with it many situational and environmental dilemmas and a situational problem may well have its source in a personality disturbance. It would, of course, be highly convenient if problems could be categorised and circumscribed so neatly but to suggest that they can is to fly in the face of the facts.

In his paper he argues against all the distinctions between counselling and psychotherapy made by Brammer and Shostrum (1982) and many others. I have no doubt this debate will continue unresolved for some considerable time. The debate may have more to do with status and money than with substantive differences. I am frequently told that in private practice the label ‘psychotherapy’ attracts higher fees from clients than ‘counselling’. However, so far as I can tell, there is a great deal of common ground between counselling and psychotherapy. Clients talk about their experience of being on the receiving end of counselling or psychotherapy in very similar terms. Fee differentials notwithstanding, the difference between the two appears to be more important to practitioners than to clients. From an ethical perspective, it is clear to me that counsellors and psychotherapists work within the same ethical framework. It may be that if differences between the two roles can be established, there will be some corresponding differences in standards of practice or training, but even these may simply be details in comparison with the many standards shared in common.

Counselling, Counselling Skills and Embedded Counselling

The development of a distinction between counselling and counselling skills has played a significant part in enabling the development of counselling as a
distinct professional role. However, the notion of counselling skills remains controversial and is much criticized by those who prefer ‘embedded counselling’. In this section I will set out how counselling skills emerged as a term for particular types of activity before considering the criticisms of this development. Although I was an early advocate for ‘counselling skills’ (Bond, 1989), I recognize that there is some validity in the concerns about this development. The issues are slippery so I will start by considering a common misunderstanding.

The most obvious misunderstanding is based on the idea that ‘counselling skills’ is a label for a set of activities unique to counselling. Although the term is sometimes used in this way, it is quickly discredited because any attempt to list specific ‘counselling skills’, e.g. active listening, paraphrasing, using open questions, reflective responses, etc., quickly looks indistinguishable from lists labelled social skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, etc.

In order to understand what is meant by ‘counselling skills’, it is useful to take the two words separately.

‘Counselling’ is an indication of the source of the concept historically. It indicates that even though these skills are not unique to counselling, it is the way they have been articulated in counselling that has been useful to other roles. For example, advice-giving has a much longer history than counselling skills, but the tendency has been to concentrate on the content of the advice rather than the way it is delivered. However, the methods advisers use to communicate with clients can be adapted to improve the way advice is given and maximize the client’s involvement in the decision-making. ‘Counselling’ in this context is acknowledging the source of the concept and method of communication. Similarly, nurses, tutors, personnel managers, social workers and many others have all recognized that there are advantages in adapting the methods of communication used in counselling to aspects of their own role. One way in which an outside observer might detect that counselling skills are being used is the pattern of communication. This is illustrated in Table 2.1.

Imparting expertise involves the expert in communicating her knowledge and expertise to the recipient and therefore takes up most of the time available. This contrasts with conversation, where both participants tend to contribute for equal lengths of time and in a pattern which flows backwards and forwards. The use of counselling skills will usually change the pattern of communication in favour of the recipient, who speaks for most of the available time. Part of the expertise in using counselling skills is learning how to communicate briefly in ways which do not interrupt
the flow of the speaker but at the same time help the speaker more effectively address the issue that is concerning them. When counselling skills are being used, an outside observer might notice that the recipient is encouraged to take greater control of the agenda of the dialogue than in the other styles of communication. The values implicit in the use of counselling skills are similar to those of counselling which place an emphasis on the client’s capacity for self-determination in how help is sought as well as for any decisions or actions that may result.

Other things, which might be apparent to an outside observer, would be the way the recipient is encouraged or enabled to participate in deciding the agenda for the total transaction. So the values implicit in the interactions are similar to those of counselling, which place an emphasis on the client’s capacity for self-determination.

The term ‘skills’ in ‘counselling skills’ is sometimes taken in a very literal sense to mean ‘discrete behaviours’ but this is not the way the term ‘skills’ is understood in the social sciences. Skills that are used to enhance relationships can be distinguished from ‘physical skills’ as in sport or work, and ‘mental’ and ‘intellectual’ skills not merely on the basis of observable behaviours. They are inextricably linked to the goal of the person using them. For instance, Michael Argyle (1981) states, ‘by socially skilled behaviour I mean behaviour which is effective in realising the goals of the interactor’. In the context of counselling skills, those goals are to implement the values of counselling by assisting the self-expression and autonomy of the recipient.

One of the ways in which an independent observer might be able to distinguish between ‘counselling skills’ and counselling is whether the contracting is explicit between the two people. This is highlighted in one of the alternative definitions of counselling which is still in popular use: ‘People become engaged in counselling when a person, occupying regularly or temporarily the role of counsellor, offers or agrees explicitly to offer time, attention or respect to another person or persons temporarily in the role of client’ (BAC, 1984). This definition was originally devised to distinguish

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Pattern of flow</th>
<th>Time ratio</th>
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<tr>
<td>Imparting expertise</td>
<td>Interactor ⇒ Recipient</td>
<td>80:20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Interactor ⇔ Recipient</td>
<td>50:50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselling skills</td>
<td>Interactor ⇐ Recipient</td>
<td>20:80</td>
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The Background

TABLE 2.1 Differences in communication
between spontaneous or *ad hoc* counselling and formal counselling. The overt nature of the latter, involving ‘offers’ and explicit agreements, was seen as ‘the dividing line between the counselling task and the *ad hoc* counselling and is the major safeguard of the rights of the consumer’ (BAC, 1985). The definition also provides a useful basis for distinguishing when someone is using counselling skills in a role other than that of counsellor or when they are counselling.

This set of views provides the basis for determining when counselling skills are being used. Counselling skills are being used:

- *when* there is intentional use of specific interpersonal skills which reflect the values of counselling;
- *and* when the practitioner’s primary (e.g. nurse, tutor, line manager, social worker, personnel officer, helper) is enhanced without being changed;
- *and* when the client perceives the practitioner as acting within their primary professional or caring role which is *not* that of being a counsellor.

The values of counselling would focus on respecting the client’s values, experience, thoughts, feelings and their capacity for self-determination, and aiming to serve the best interests of the client.

There are three frequent misconceptions that I encounter in discussions about counselling skills. These are as follows:

*Using counselling skills is always a lower-order activity than counselling*  This is not the case. Arguably, the user of counselling skills may be working under more demanding circumstances than the counsellor, who usually has the benefit of more extended periods of time which have already been agreed in advance. In comparison, the user of counselling skills may be working more opportunistically with much less certainty about the duration of the encounter. Users of counselling skills can be more or less skilled, just like counsellors. However, using counselling skills is not a role in itself but something important to enhance the performance of another role. This means that the capacity to use counselling skills effectively depends not only on being skilled in their use but also on someone’s competence in their primary role, e.g. nurse, tutor. For all these reasons, some people may require a higher level of competence to use counselling skills than may be required in counselling. It certainly cannot be assumed that using counselling skills is a lower level of activity.
People in occupational roles, other than counsellor, cannot counsel. This would mean that doctors, nurses, youth workers, etc., cannot counsel but can only use counselling skills. This is not the case. With appropriate training, counselling supervision, and clear contracting with the client in ways consistent with counselling, it seems to me that anyone can change to taking on the role of ‘counsellor’. There are important issues about keeping the boundaries between different roles clear and managing overlapping roles or dual relationships. But not all dual relationships are undesirable, provided the boundary between the relationships can be clearly identified and is respected by both the counsellor and client. Usually it is easier, whenever possible, to avoid the potential pitfalls of dual relationships by ensuring that the counsellor is independent of the provision of other services and other relationships, whether personal or professional, with the client.

Anyone with the occupational title ‘counsellor’ is always counselling. This is not the case. As the concept of counselling has narrowed down into a specifically contracted role, there is a need for ‘counsellors’ to distinguish between when they are counselling and when they are performing other roles, such as training, supervision or managing. In each of these other roles a counsellor is likely to be using counselling skills.

The distinction between counselling skills and counselling may have been helpful in pursuing the professionalization of counselling as a distinct role by distinguishing a more defined approach to counselling from situations where someone uses a more loosely defined approach to using counselling to support some other helping role, such as being a tutor, a health worker or other role that has its own identity and expertise. Professionally, within organizations like BACP, the creation of counselling skills provided the conceptual and political space to give better focused attention to what is entailed ethically to being a counselor. The complications of other professional cultures and constraints could be set aside in order to concentrate on counselling as it was developing in all its variations as a specialized service. Such distinctions can lead to unequal attention being given to each part so that one becomes favoured over the other and, in this case, one type of role, namely counselling, becomes more central to professional development than the other. This fragmenting of roles can have undesirable consequences. The process of defining and restricting professional identity, even if it is to advance ethical and professional standards, cannot avoid problems
associated with becoming more exclusive and professionally inward-looking. The notion of the ‘embedded counsellor’ provides a substantial challenge to such exclusivity and may prove to be a useful remedy to any exaggerated sense of professional identity by redirecting attention to the extent to which counselling is used in its wider sense within so many other types of helping role and reaffirming the value of such work. John McLeod has written eloquently in favour of the embedded counsellor. He argues that it is socially and culturally important to explicitly acknowledge all the counselling that takes place in brief episodes embedded within other professional tasks (teaching, nursing, and career advice):

I believe that it would be a good thing if teachers, nurses and other human service workers allowed themselves to respond to the emotional pain of their clients and listened to their personal stories. We live in a world characterized by an all-consuming drive towards efficiency and a bureaucratic approach to people. In this kind of world, a bit of counselling is humanizing factor. (McLeod, 2007)

The concept of the ‘embedded counsellor’ is a welcome development if it helps to rebuild links with other professions that may have been broken in the quest for a professional identity for counsellors and revives a shared focus on humanizing values that are so precious in everyday living. Approached in this way, the use of the label ‘embedded counsellor’ invites us to re-engage with the radical values that prompted the origins of counselling in ways that are relevant to current life.

**Conclusion**

The creation of a definition of counselling is difficult. ‘Counselling’ is a word and an activity that has several different meanings. Generally in society, it is used in many diverse and sometimes contradictory ways. It is important to distinguish between whether the term ‘counselling’ is being used to refer specifically to activities that fall within or outside the scope of the counselling movement and, more specifically, the use of the term ‘counselling’ by national professional counselling organizations. This distinction determines whether or not the role is subject to published ethical standards and guidelines. Even within these organizations, there
are differences of view about whether counselling is a narrowly or more widely defined activity. The wider meaning refers to the groups of activities incorporating any or all of counselling skills, counselling, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Narrower definitions tend to differentiate between these activities and may assume a hierarchy in expertise and knowledge. The dual use of the same term in a narrow and wide usage is not unique to counselling. This practice recurs throughout the caring professions. Perhaps the greatest range is encompassed by the term ‘social services’, which in its narrow usage refers to specific social work agencies but may also be used to encompass social work, housing, education, health care and other provisions of the welfare state (Mays et al., 1975).

The potential for adapting counselling to new social contexts and needs is probably endless. One of the major current challenges for all British professional counselling organizations is the under-representation within their membership of the cultural diversity of the general population. There is also some evidence that the delivery of services is unevenly distributed across different sections of the population. As professional bodies and agencies grapple with these issues and how to make counselling more multicultural, it may be that they will also move towards a wider definition of counselling in order to incorporate greater cultural flexibility. Preliminary evidence from international conferences appears to suggest that some of the defining characteristics of counselling that are significant in Britain are less important or may even be inappropriate to other national contexts. For example, the importance attached to being non-directive, which is probably weakening in the British counselling movement as it is increasingly viewed as a characteristic of specific models of counselling rather than of counselling in general, may not even have been adopted in other cultures and national associations. International associations incorporate potential and actual diversity within counselling by adopting wider definitions of counselling than those generally adopted by national-specific counselling organizations. Where this occurs, the definition is expanded to incorporate activities and roles such as advice, guidance and possibly befriending. It may be that there will be a trend in a similar direction within the counselling movement in Britain. This would reverse a trend towards narrower definitions of the role, which, in comparison to the international counselling movement, have been more preoccupied with the therapeutic aspects of counselling rather than its social and its educational potential.
Definitions of counselling are not permanent or universal. Counselling is a term that is being used in different ways within society in general and within the national and international counselling movement. The only way of communicating clearly about counselling is to clarify the intended meaning from the outset. Not to do so risks confusion about what is considered appropriate to a particular role. Counselling is used in this book to refer to a role and type of activity delivered in accordance with professional standards that emphasize the ethical significance of enabling clients to increase their capacity to act for themselves and to gain an improved sense of personal well-being.