



Are Psychosocial Counselors Walking the Talk? A Narrative Inquiry

Sudip Ghimire

School Counseling, Kathmandu University, Kathmandu Nepal

sudip_med1sc2025@kusoed.edu.np

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0213-8570>

Shree Krishna Wagle, Ph.D.,

Professor,

Kathmandu University, Kathmandu, Nepal

shreekrishna@kusoed.edu.np

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1371-7898>

Type of Research: Original Research

Received: June 22, 2026

Revised & Accepted: August 19, 2026

Copyright: Author(s) (2026)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Abstract

Background: In Nepal, Psychosocial Counselors play a vital role in Nepal's community based psychosocial and mental health system. There was no academic evidence about how effectively psychosocial counselors translate their knowledge and skills into actual personal and professional practice. The research was taken as a priority because the psychosocial counselor's well-being affects not only their own life and their family, but also the quality of the individual counseling they provided. Therefore, the study raised a critical question that are psychosocial counselors truly 'walking the talk'?

Methods: Applying a narrative inquiry approach, the study explored the lived experiences of four psychosocial counselors selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through open ended interviews and the data were analyzed based on thematic narrative approach. Pestalozzi's Head, Heart, and Hands framework was applied during the interpretation of the findings.

Results: The finding highlights that psychosocial counselors largely demonstrate alignment between professional knowledge and practice through cognitive and ethical competence,



emotional awareness and the application of counseling knowledge and skills into practical life. However, this position is not always complete due to institutional limitations, workplace challenges, and emotional burdens occasionally hinders this alignment. The study suggests that walking the talk is a lifelong process.

Conclusion: Hence, continuous professional development, organizational support are essential for sustaining effective practice and effective institutional support.

Novelty: This is the first narrative inquiry studies to document and present the lived stories and experiences of psychosocial Counselors in Nepal.

Keywords: Narrative inquiry, Professional integrity, Psychosocial counseling, Reflective practice, Self-awareness

Introduction

This part introduces the context that led researcher to explore experiences of overwhelm in psychosocial counseling and provides an overview of the psychosocial landscape in Nepal. It also outlines the gaps in understanding how psychosocial counselors walk the talk practice, research purpose, research questions, and the significance of the study.

Facing Overwhelm in Counseling

My journey as a Psychosocial Counselor begin when I received six months training from Save the Children and Antrang in 2005. The training provided me extensive theoretical and practical knowledge as well as skills. At the end of the training session on 3rd May 2006, I gave a written examination where I answered the questions confidently. Although I did not rank first or second, but there was no disappointment about the results. After completing the training, I returned to my home district, Lamjung and joined SEORC, an organization working with conflict-affected people. My first counseling case was a woman having traumatic experiences. Her son had been killed during the conflict. I found it very difficult to sit first counseling session. As she shared her pain, I felt restless and overwhelmed. The session made me panic; I was confused what to do or what not to do. The session ended with full of confusion in my mind. Even after returning home, her suffering stayed with me, and her painful story kept ringing in my mind. During the training, I learned how to prevent countertransference. However, I was unable to apply it effectively in practice. I had to seek support from my supervisor. I worked almost 20 years in counseling field and experiences several traumatic incidents. It made me think about the situation of Psychosocial Counselors across the country.

Psychosocial Counselors Land in Nepal

In Nepal, around 8,00 Psychosocial counselors were previously reported to be working. However, after the massive earthquake in 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic, the number has been increased dramatically. The most recent estimate from National Association of Psychosocial Counselors suggest that the current number is around 3000. There is no official data of counselors in Nepal. (Rai, 2021). There is also ongoing discussion who qualifies as a psychosocial counselor and what level of education or training is required. Regardless of



where they receive training or education, most of them are employed in local level, One Stop Crisis Center (OCMC), Schools, Hospitals and National Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Whether working in the community or in the schools, psychosocial counselors acquire both theoretical and practical knowledge in addressing social and emotional problem, career guidance, academic guidance, psychological problems, and common mental health issues. In a country like Nepal, there are limited number of psychiatrists/clinical psychologist and psychologist (Jordans, 2017). Psychosocial counselors are helping bridge the gap between specialists and community. These skills and knowledge were guided from the training as well as educational institutions and their practices have continued for years

According to the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) course module, individuals who have completed the 780-hour intensive psychosocial counseling training, have a +2 qualification, and are aged above 21 are considered as Psychosocial Counselor. The first, second, and third levels of the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guideline is considered highly significant role in the community due to the WHO's task-shifting approach (IASC, 2008). These levels provide psychosocial support intervention including awareness raising, psychoeducation, case identification, counseling (Individual, group, family, couple), capacity building, advocacy, coordination, and referrals within the community and school settings.

On the other hand, University Graduates (eg: Kathmandu University) are also working as counselor; named as School Counselor. They support the overall school counseling program for students, parents, and teachers in three core domains: social emotional support, academic counseling and career guidance. School counselors are also involved in research and policy-related work in school setting (Satyal, 2025). Currently, school counseling is also becoming in demanded field in Nepal.

Gap in Understanding 'walk the talk'

Individuals become psychosocial counselors or school counselors through training or formal education, they do apply their skill/knowledge in their practical life. The questions have been raised about whether they are simply doing exactly what they say. There has been limited scale of studies have done how much Psychosocial Counselors are applying the skills they have learned in their life. Globally, academic papers were more focused on internal and external factors of counselors that cannot draw the meaning for walking the talk because counselors real lived experiences have not been adequately captured. Studies are conducted on a small scale and isolated topic. It is difficult to provide a clear understanding on the topic. In context of Nepal, no such studies were found. My personal observations also indicated that traumatic events were encountered during a session with a female client. This reflected the challenges in translating learned skills into practical application.

Meaning of 'walking the talk' in this study

The idiom 'Walking the talk' means to act in accordance with what you say you will do or behave in line with professional ethics (Simons, 2002). In this study, 'walking the talk' refers to the alignment between counselor's theoretical knowledge (head), emotional awareness



(heart) and actual practices (hands) in both professional and personal contexts. (Gazibara, 2013). It reflects how psychosocial counselors not only apply counseling theories and techniques in their professional work but also maintain emotional balance and demonstrate similar positive practices in their personal lives. This alignment supports continuous personal and professional growth and ensures authenticity, integrity, and effectiveness in helping relationships.

Research Purpose

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of psychosocial counselors in Nepal and it is critically examined to what extent psychosocial counselors translate their training into practice, and to understand the factors that enable or hinder them from truly walking the talk in real-world counseling contexts.

Research question

The central guiding question of the study is: are Psychosocial Counselors walking the talk?

Significance of the study

This study contributes to understanding how psychosocial counselors in Nepal apply their knowledge in real-life practice through the concept of walking the talk. It reflects the gap between what counselors learn in training and what they are actually doing in practice. It also highlights the challenges they face while working in emotionally difficult and resource-limited settings. The study provides insights for improving organizations and policymakers in strengthening psychosocial counseling mechanism. Ultimately, it aims to enhance the quality and sustainability of counseling services in Nepal. The findings of the study highlight a deeper understanding of how theoretical knowledge is implemented in practical life. As a result, the paper provides guidance for those who are willing to work in the community and schools as a counselor and how to effectively translate the learned skills into practical life. In addition, the paper guides policy makers in developing proper and supportive counseling environment in schools and community with limited resources.

Hence, this chapter introduced the context of the issue by reflecting on the researcher's personal experiences of overwhelm in psychosocial counseling. Similarly, this chapter also updated the psychosocial counseling landscape in Nepal including the existing gap in understanding whether counselors truly 'walk the talk.' The last section of this chapter also presents the study's purpose, research question, and significance in exploring how psychosocial counselors translate their training into authentic professional and personal practice.

Literature Review

Relevant national and international articles were reviewed to understand the concept of 'walking the talk and factors influencing psychosocial counselor's ability to translate professional knowledge into practice. After reviewing the paper, most of the scholarly work and recent empirical studies published indicated that psychosocial counselors are professionally trained to support others but gaps remain in their own ethical consciousness,



unsettled personal issues, working environment, and the role of supervision in maintaining professional integrity (Corey, 2011; Balci, 2023). Connecting with this, Corey (2011) and Balci (2023) both emphasize how internal factors, recognition of personal issues and ethical frameworks influence counselor's ability to apply knowledge in practice. In contrast, Khadka et al. (2025); Ronnestad et al. (2023) and Chae and Backer (2024) focus on external factors that depends on how training, reflective practice, unresolved personal issues, supportive environments, rather than fixed skills to achieve 'walking the talk'. I argue that these studies are fragmented in nature and unable to develop a meaningful understanding by integrating counselors' reflective experiences. This literature review is based on the two major themes of influencing aspect to applying the real knowledge into practical life. This literature review is formed in two major themes: (i) internal factors and (ii) external factors that make it challenging for counselors to remain grounded in real world.

Internal factors

The internal reflection or factors mean the inner psychological experience such as emotions, personal values, memories etc. While working with client, these psychological factors influence psychosocial counselors' feelings and emotions. Corey (2011); Balci (2023) and Richard et al. emphasize the significance of counselor's internal world affecting counseling or personal life. In particular, Corey (2011) focuses on the internal world of the counselors and highlighting the importance of self-awareness, recognition of unresolved personal issues such as worry, anxiousness, and awareness of transference and countertransference. According to the author, counselors are not merely technicians who use tools; but they are therapeutic professionals whose personal qualities and professional presence shape how interventions are applied (Corey, 2011). I agree with the author view because I have also experienced difficulties when dealing with traumatic cases. In such situations, I often feel worried and became anxious. Therefore, Counselors emotions, internal emotions and action matters in the counseling process. From this perspective, ethical practice is closely linked to the counselor's ability to reflect on personal experiences and manage emotional reactions, with supervision identified as a key mechanism for maintaining professional ethic.

In contract, Balci (2023) explores the professional behavior using metaphors such as traffic lights, compasses, and oxygen to illustrate how counselors understand ethics as a source of direction, morality, and accountability. While Corey emphasizes inward self-examination and emotional processes, Balci highlights ethics as an internal and symbolic guide for decision-making (Balci, 2023). Together, these studies suggest that ethical counseling practice requires both deep personal self-awareness and a clear, shared ethical framework to support professional integrity. Similarly, Richard et al. (2010) extended the discussion by exploring the relationship between counselor's self-care practices, mindfulness and overall well-being. For instance, the writer examined the sample of 148 U.S. based professionals, the study found that greater engagement of counselors in self-care activities and higher levels of mindfulness activities were positively associated impact counselors overall well-being. These findings



also link with Corey's importance on internal self-awareness with Balci's view of ethics as a guiding framework for professional practices (Richards, 2010).

Similarly, Chigwedere et al. (2021) found that self-care practice contributes to psychosocial counselors personal and professional growth. It helps the concept of “walking the talk” by suggesting that counselors need opportunities to experience and reflect on therapeutic principles in their own lives before integrating them into professional practice. Indeed, if a counselor practices mindfulness exercises and reflect self, they can take care of themselves and apply the skills they have learned effectively. However, if counselors are in distressed mood, it can be difficult to apply the learned skills and support others.

External Factors

Different from the above perspectives, external factors play a key role in enabling counselors to apply the counseling skill in actual practices. The quality of training, unsatisfied personal needs, family issues, supervision, peer support, and the work environment influences shaping counseling. Khadka et al. (2025) and Ronnestad (2023) argue that effective counseling is not achieved through fixed counseling skills alone but through continues external reflection or factors. Khadka et al. (2025) prove that both the skills of well-trained counselors and the environments in which counseling is delivered significantly shape the quality of guidance and counseling services. These findings indicate that continuous professional development and the availability of safe, dedicated counseling spaces are crucial for walking the talk in the Nepali community and school context. When such conditions are in place, counseling services are more effectively implemented and are associated with improved positive outcomes for students (Khadka, 2025). Moreover, Ronnestad (2023) presents his view in a developmental perspective on counseling practice. According him, ethical, effective counseling and caring self are lifelong process rather than a fixed set of knowledge and skills. He highlights continuous reflection, openness to complexity, and integration of personal and professional identities are essential to counselor's development across all career stages (Rønnestad, 2023). Moreover, Chae and Backer (2024) discussed the supervision and reflective learning that has helped psycho-social counselors connect professional knowledge with practical experiences. Hence, it is bridge between what counselors learn and how they apply their knowledge in real-world practice.

Overall, the literature indicates that counselors face challenges in applying learned knowledge/techniques and skills due to both internal and external reflection and factors. Studies highlight the lack of self-awareness, personal internal factors such as worry, fear and anxiousness, difficulties with transference and countertransference problem when applying the learned skills (Corey, 2011; Balci, 2023; Richards et al., 2010). Other scholars indicate that counselor's effectiveness is influenced more by unresolved personal factors, reflective practice, and supportive environments rather than fixed skills (Khadka et al., 2025; Ronnestad, 2023).

Gaps



After reviewing the existing academic paper, it can be concluded that psychosocial counselors are influenced by internal and external environments, but it does not address the extent to which learned skills are actually applied in their practical and professional life. Most of the studies were conducted on a small scale and isolated topic. What is missing in the literature is an understanding of how effectively learned skill/knowledge applied into real world practice. This gap highlights to explore the practical application of counselor's competences in personal and professional life. In context of Nepal, no such studies were found. Therefore, it is essential to explored and generate meaning by incorporating psychosocial counselors' real experiences. It contributes how psychosocial counselors in Nepal apply their training in practice, the gap between knowledge and action, and the challenges they face, to inform improvements in counseling systems and service quality.

Therefore, the existing academic paper shows that psychosocial counselors' practices are influenced by both internal (self-awareness, ethics, unresolved personal issues) and external factors (eg: training quality, supervision, working environment), but there are limited understanding of how they actually apply learned skills in real-life settings. This gap is particularly evident in Nepal, highlighting the need for further research on how counselors bridge the gap between knowledge and practice to improve counseling services.

Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework applied to explore how psychosocial counselors in Nepal apply their knowledge/skills in real-life settings. It outlines the research approach, study site and participants' selection process, details procedure for data collection and analysis process. Furthermore, it also included the ethical standards, and researcher positionality.

Study Approach

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology, specifically narrative inquiry which focuses on understanding human stories through lived experiences (BUTINA, 2015, (CLANDININ, 2023)). It enables individuals to construct meaning from past-present and future experiences. It offers a rich understanding of how lived experiences shape identity and practice. This approach is relevant as it explores how psychosocial counselors integrate theory, emotions and professional practice in real life settings. By allowing participants to share their personal and professional stories, it provides deeper insight into how they 'walk the talk' in their counseling practice.

Study site and participants Selection

A purposive sampling method applied to select four psychosocial counselors (3-Female counselors and 1-male Counselor) as the respondents. Four participants are sufficient for the study, as it prioritizes depth over breadth. They hold the CTEVT 780-hour intensive psychosocial counseling training, hold a +2 qualification, and were between 21 and 40 years of age. Those with a Postgraduate Diploma (PGD) or Master's degree in Counseling Psychology were also preferred. While selecting the participants, none of them were selected



from same district. It is ensured a balanced representation from the Hills and Terai province. As noted by Butian (2025), sample size in qualitative narrative studies is often ambiguous and depends on the depth and quality of participants responses rather than numerical representation (Butian, 2015).

The study applied their pseudonyms of all (4) psychosocial counselors such as Rita Dhakal, Yunus Bhandari, Shah and Rai. Rai was a male psychosocial counselor and rest of the psychosocial counselors were female. Each has the background of psychosocial counseling for 10 years with work primarily focused in community, school and municipality settings. Their age group was between 36-40 years, representing from Dang, Kathmandu, Jhapa and Taplejung district. They had six months psychosocial counseling (780 hours) training from authorized organizations and hold a Postgraduate (PGD) and a master's degree in counseling psychology.

Data Collection and analysis Process

Data were collected through open ended interviews through online because of long distance. Interview started from their professional journey, personal and professional reflections. Before recording or interview, consent form was signed. Secondary informations also revieded to get better understanding of the context. Later on, the audio tapes and interviews were transcribed in English and analyzed to identify similar trend, different trend, challenges, strategies to minimize the gap between theory and real-world settings. Finally, the paper also ensured reliable and valid research criteria that made readers to understand the context and meaning of their experiences and privacy of counselors were respected and maintained. Their interview and audio recordings were securely stored and only allowed to researcher and supervisor if needed. After conducting all interviews, similar and different themes will be coded. The analysis will be carried out based on thematic narrative analysis. The participants' responses will be written in the researcher's own words adding with evidences.

Ethical considerations

Before receiving the information, consent form was obtained verbally from the participants. Later on, written informed consent was then collected for the formal interviews. Participants were informed that the recorded information would be used only for research purposes, and confidentiality was strictly maintained.

During the interviews, special self-care technique was applied to ensure that participants did not experience emotional distress. When participants became emotionally overwhelmed, the conversation was paused, and attention was given to self-care and emotional stabilization. Further interviews were conducted in a separate session when appropriate. moreover, ethical approval for this study was obtained from the ethical review board of the National Health Research Council Nepal (NHRC) under Registration No. 116/2026.

Researcher positionality and minimize biasness

The researcher also has as a similar background with respondents. Two were the researcher former students who had attended some of the six months psychosocial counseling training sessions while other two were professionals working in the field. Although, the researcher



had prior professional relationships with participants. The researcher was not aware of their personal stories and experiences. This positionality may have influenced the research process. Therefore, to reduce researcher biasness, major four major strategies will be applied throughout the research process.

Firstly, the researcher will avoid making assumptions and will focus on participants actual lived experiences not thoughts/ideas. Secondly, the study will use triangulation by incorporating multiple sources of information to enhance credibility, and the findings will be shared with the supervisor for review and critical feedback. Thirdly, the researcher will emphasize collecting participants' factual experiences rather than focusing only on their views or opinions. Finally, during the data analysis process, the findings will be presented in a neutral and evidence-based manner, avoiding personal judgment or subjective interpretation.

To sum up, this chapter described a qualitative narrative inquiry study exploring how psychosocial counselors in Nepal apply their skills in real-life practice. For this, four experienced psychosocial counselors from different districts were selected through purposive sampling. The information was collected via open-ended interviews with informed consent. The study also received ethical approval from NHRC. Finally, the data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic narrative analysis to identify key patterns and experiences. While doing this, the study maintained the confidentiality and ensured psychosocial well-being of participants.

Theoretical Framework

This paper explored the findings through the lens of head, heart and hands learning theory developed by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. He argues that the holistic, integrated and experiential learning are achieve through the development of cognitive (head), emotional (heart) and practical action (hands) (Gazibara, 2013). In relation to this study, the head represents counselor's knowledge, understanding of counseling theories, techniques, ethical guidelines, coping strategies, self-awareness, transference, countertransference etc. The heart indicates counselor emotional responses, personal values, belief and faith systems, internal concerns, stress, and experiences of burnout. Similarly, the hands refer to counselor actual behaviors in counseling sessions, their practices in personal life, supervision-seeking and engagement in reflective practice.

In the context of counseling, this theoretical concept provides a meaningful lens to examine whether counselors are able to translate theoretical ideas, self-awareness into ethical and consistent practice. This model is aligning with experiential learning theory (Kolba, 1984) and support narrative inquiry by analyzing lived experiences of counselor. It is therefore the study allows to explore connect between theory and real-world practice allowing lived experiences of counselors. Thus, the question of whether they are truly walking the talk.

Findings



This section presents the findings of psychosocial counselors' journeys. It was analyzed through thematic narrative analysis focusing on identity shifts, ethical dilemmas and practice enactment. Three major themes emerged: Self-awareness and personal transformation; Ethical practice and professional integrity; Application of skills to client engagement and community work. These themes are abstracted through the narratives of four psychosocial counselors: Rita Dhakal, Yunus Bhandari, Shah and Rai.

Self-awareness and Personal Transformation

Self-awareness, along with positive guidance, can develop individuals to overcome fear and self-doubt and move toward personal transformation. In case of Rita Dhakal, she was not aware of what was happening to her heart-mind before the training. She was struggling with low self-confidence, fear, and hesitation while communicating with others. Her husband enrolled her in counseling training and PG program, but Rita refused to attend several times. She continued to follow her husband wherever he went. Rita said that she used to panic whenever the phone rang and had no confidence in herself.

Husband's request, and seeing her friends (eg: Kalpana) had attended the training and secured jobs, she gained the courage to join the training. She recalled her first day of the training in her own words as: *'In the morning at 5:30, my husband took me on his motorcycle. I wore a black jacket, black bag, white vest, and a red cap. Even though I looked beautiful from the outside, I was completely scared and nervous inside. I couldn't even introduce myself properly. Even after returning home, I was anxious, wondering what husband might ask me.'* This illustrates how negative self-perceptions influenced her daily life.

Similarly, Yunus Bhandari felt very fearful at the beginning of the training. She said, *"When I submitted my application, I thought it was job, but after attending the interview, I realized it was a training participation selection. The person who informed me about it was actually my relative. He was very strict; even his shadow would threaten me. I was worried about how I could attend the training while being in his office because I felt traumatic experiences with him."* Bhandari said that even official email made her panic because she did not have money to pay deposit of the training. The message was as follows:

Dear Participants,

The six-month Psychosocial Counseling Training, organized by.... with the support of, will begin on 10 September 2010 at 10:00 AM. All participants are requested to wear simple, dim-colored dresses and no jewelry and lipstick during the training. Additionally, a deposit of NPR 6,000 is required to participate in the training. This amount will be refunded after successful completion of the training. If a participant leaves the training midway, the deposit will not be refunded and all expenses during the training must be borne by the participant.

Now, she realized that these messages were intended to make the learning process more effective and core values of psychosocial counselors in counseling. She described this lesson as unforgettable for her counseling journey because if this message had not been mentioned in the training, trainees' counselors might not realize the importance of cultural adaptation.



In contrast to the experiences of Rita Dhakal and Yunus Bhandari, another psychosocial counselor Shah's experience was somewhat different. She had some prior knowledge about the psychosocial issues because her aunt had been working in this area for a long time. In case of Shah, she had been working as a Medical Representative (MR) in a pharmaceutical company for eight years and was also involved in her own business. Therefore, at the beginning, she was curious and somewhat doubtful about how such training could benefit her. Reflecting on her lifestyle, she mentioned that she used to pay more attention to material aspects of life such as food, clothing, and personal appearance, and she initially felt that counseling training might not bring significant change in her life. However, after about 15–20 days of participating in the training, she experienced a significant shift in her thoughts. According to her, the training helped her engage in self-reflection, develop a better understanding of people's emotions, and gain a new perspective on life values. As a result, she decided to leave her previous business having three staff and move forward in the direction of becoming a psychosocial counselor.

Moreover, the counseling journey of Rai began from Taplejung district. He recalled his early stage of career that "I had already shown twice at the British Army, but not selected. I was confused about what to do or what not to do in life." He Said that right after disqualified in British army, he was unable to continue his studies. He felt uncertain and stress. Later on, he had seen the training announcement in the local bulletin. The application deadline was about to close by an hour. In hurry, Rai went to the organization in Damak to inquire about the training but the office assistant at the door said application cannot be accepted without citizenship but he did not bring the citizen with him and came back with the citizenship. After the interview, he was selected for the training in 2013. He said the selection process was highly competitive. On one side, he felt some psychological pressure due to the experienced participants. On the other hand, he had lost his hearing in his right ear. Despite these obstacles, he fully attended and actively practiced counseling skills. According to him, the counseling training reminded his aspiration to become a psychosocial counselor as well as psychologist. Now, he realized that he was not a person who handles a gun but understands the inner feelings of individuals. Like other psychosocial counselors, he also did not aware about what counseling was.

Transformative phase

All psychosocial counselors observed a transformative phase which reflected a significant positive change in participants' thoughts, identity, and personal growth. For instance, Rita Dhakal's reflected that the day 28th Poush 2071, became a turning point in her life because she had taken initiative to take group photo. The group photo, published in Samadhan Daily, still reminds her. She said, *'although the photo was black and white but, it made my life more colorful.'*

She has kept this news hidden in her makeup box in her personal cupboard. Through the training, Rita Dhakal gained a deeper understanding of herself, taking care of herself, recognizing her abilities, and managing her time effectively. She used to monitor her mood



daily and practiced keeping a daily journal that she had been taught as tool to help clients apply in their own lives. Today, Rita Dhakal is an experienced and motivated supervisor of 11 psychosocial counselors. She provided counseling to nearly 900 people for 8 years and is pushing a Master in Counseling psychology at Tribhuvan University.

Yunus Bhandari's turning point came during the six-month Psychosocial Counseling Training. She realized that she used to show defensive behavior, often speaking before listening, which was not always healthy for her. She worked on these behaviors during and after the training and gradually became calmer. Nowadays, negative comments from others affect her much less. Her family and supervisor have also noticed and appreciated these positive changes.

In Shah's case, she began expressing her emotions and thoughts through poetry, which became her adaptive coping behavior following the six months psychosocial counseling training. She has written and published several poems. She said that she did not get freedom in her childhood because her parents were very strict. During our conversation, she shared the following poem in Nepali.

आजआज, भोलिभोलि भन्दै धेरै रात बिते,
फेरिएन मेरो टालो, आज पनि त्यसमै सुत्ने ।
चोली फाट्यो, भोटो फाट्यो, बाहिरबाट देखे अरे,
भित्रभित्रै फाट्यो यो मन, कसैले नि देखेन रे ।

The poem reflects inner pain and emotional struggles. It was written when she counseled a mother who was suffering anxious and spent all money seeking treatment for her son.

Meanwhile, Rai had a negative perception towards Counselors and psychologists. He said, 'when I was at grade 11, my teacher suggested not to study psychology because if someone studies psychology he/she might become psycho'. After the training, he changed his initial perceptions and ready to pay more attention to self and listening more carefully to others.

Looking at the initial counseling journeys of all psychosocial counselors, they have experienced negative cognitions in their life. The training appears to have helped self-awareness, and cognitive reframing abilities.

Ethical Practice and Professional integrity

All psychosocial Counselors followed professional ethics and integrity in their practice; however, they faced some practical challenges such as boundary setting, managing emotional stress, and receiving institutional support. For instance, Rita Dhakal described several situations where clients and families attempted to offer gifts or special treatment, but she maintained professional boundaries. A part of brief conversation with Rita is citation below:

S¹- How did you manage situations when clients and client's family offer gifts?

R- clients and their family members invited me for meals or offer vegetables. In such situation, I usually explained that I must maintain professional boundaries, as counseling ethics, i discourage accepting gifts.

¹ R-Rita Dhakal, Psychosocial Counselor S-Sudip Ghimire, Researcher



S- Did you experience a situation like this?

R- Yes, we (myself and other 2 staff) had a lunch at a hotel of beneficiary but they refused to take money. I explained that accepting free food would go against professional ethics. Later on, client family agreed to take money but less than what others usually paid.

Rita's experience connects with the ethical guidelines discussed in Gerald Corey's *Issues and Ethics in the Helping Professions*, which emphasize maintaining professional boundaries and avoiding gifts from clients, to support integrity and protect client welfare. Moreover, Rita says that it was around 10.45 PM, a client called her and updated her confusion applying the breathing exercise. The client told her to guide for her better sleep. Rita said, *"I still remember my response on that night, 'I can help you, but I am with my families and it's my bed time. I softly educated her, 'I have a family and need personal time. Please try to contact me during working hours unless it's an emergency. I have provided you a national suicide prevention help line number 1166, they can also help you in the emergency or late night.'"* At the beginning of the training, she felt she had to support the client at all times because it was her duty. Now, she realizes that the way she responded was ethically the right approach.

Similarly, Yunus Bhandari's also faced an emotionally challenges while working in the community. She learned what to do and what not to do in counseling. However, in practice she experienced quite different what she studied. Bhandari recalls a 45 years old woman affected by armed conflict reduced her stress through counseling. But, surprisingly the woman later purposes Yunus to marry with her son. Bhandari described that her feeling became quite shocked by this purpose. Following the counseling, the woman began bringing gifts and homemade food to the office, and even her son started following Bhandari. From a theoretical perspective, this situation also highlights the importance of maintaining professional boundaries. However, in her case, the problem was not resolved easily like Dhakal. She reported the issue to her office director, but some staff members indirectly supported the client's purposed. As a result, Bhandari felt emotionally distress from the job because of security and resigned. She described the experience as emotionally bitter. She told that whenever she felt emotionally distressed, she used to calm her mind by taking deep breaths and focusing her attention.

Additionally, Bhanadri highlighted that she used to attend personal therapy sessions (180 hours) as a part of her professional growth. For this, she has requested few days leave to her immediate supervisor, but the request was rejected. Instead, supervisor informed to the director that she was suffering from depression. The supervisor raised the questions about how she could effectively provide counseling to others because she herself suffering from depression. After hearing this, Bhandari became emotional and distressed.

In case of Shash, she realized that there are many things a psychosocial counselor should not do and recognizing these boundaries was also an important part of the learning process. She recalled her early phase of counseling, *"I face challenges while dealing with a boy having parental problems. I Listening to the client's painful experiences that made me emotionally overwhelming. I found myself in tears during and after our counseling session. His story*



deeply touched me, and I began to realize how strongly a counselor can be affected by the suffering of others." To address this problem, she told me that she used to listening to music and keeping myself busy with household tasks. These small efforts helped me gradually calm my mind and regain emotional balance, teaching me an important lesson about self-care and professional boundaries in counseling."

In recalling the massive earthquake in 2015, Rai describes a sense of his mobilization in the districts like this: 'I worked alone and handle several cases each day. My supervisors were busy in the center, I had a lot of worries and used to ask question myself am I following right path or am I doing differently.' He used to recall the memory and experience working in refuges camp where all the system was in place. To address this dilemma, he used to encourage himself and realized that such dilemmas can be overcome by a professional in his lifetime.

To sum up, psychosocial counselors consistently maintained professional ethics and boundaries despite facing some of the challenges like managing client relationships, emotional overwhelm, limited organizational support, and ethical dilemmas. Their experiences show that self-care, supervision, personal therapy, and observance to ethical principles are essential for sustaining professional integrity and wellbeing in counseling practice.

Application of skills to client engagement and community work

Psychosocial Counselors effectively implemented their knowledge and skills into action. However, most of the psychosocial counselors experienced several obstacles during psychosocial counseling. While providing counseling sessions, Rita Dhakal recalled a traumatic experience at Damauli Hospital in 2015. She had assigned to provide counseling to a 65 years old male client. During the session, she established rapport building as a therapeutic alliance with a client. Rita Dhakal observed unusual facial expression and body language of the client looking at my private parts showing sexual desire. The client told her that he was attracted to her red Kurti² and approached sexual relations and began unzipping his pant and exposing himself. This situation made Rita Dhakal feel distress and unsafe. She said, "my hands and legs were trembling. I ran away to administration. I was unable to speak. My breath went faster. Hospital staff gathered around me and asked what has happened? However, I was unable to respond properly."

According to Rita, the case made her significant distress for 2/3 days. She could not sleep well. She was unable to share her pain even with her husband and requested supervision support. After supervision support, she felt a bit relaxed and motivated. She wrote her pain in a diary and gradually she felt better and sometime she make videos and upload them on Facebook. She said, 'my some of the videos received more than 55 comments and more than 5k views.

² A traditional long tunic worn by women in Nepal.



Yunus Bhandari's experience was different than Rita's. In first case, Yunus Bhandari observed counseling session of experienced psychosocial counselor. The client was not speaking, which made a strong physical sensation in her body that reflecting anxiety and discomfort during the intervention. Sitting silently and listening to the silence made her restlessness. Later on, Yunus Bhandari found herself becoming active listener with a deeper understanding of the client's feelings and cultural sensitivity.

After completing counseling, the training, Shah began working at school in Gongabu, Kathmandu. A 12 years old boy studying in grade five was referred to her for counseling. The teacher reported her that the boy hit other students on the head. She conducted five the counseling sessions with him. As she listened to his story, Shah became tearful, struggling to manage her own emotions. He was punished at school for not doing homework. In counseling process, it was identified that his father did not buy notebooks and pens. Shah applied behavioral strategies, psychoeducation about the effect of trauma on mind, body, behavior and relationships. Resulting, he encouraged his daily activities and coordinated with teachers for his necessary support.

Overall, psychosocial counselors were able to apply their knowledge and skills effectively but they also faced significant secondary traumatic stress, ethical dilemmas and contextual challenges.

Discussion

The study interpreted through Pastalozzi's head, heart and hands learning theory. The head means knowledge or understanding of counseling concept, heart represents emotional states, values and hands refer to counselor actual behaviors of counselors. Guided by this framework, the study argues that psychosocial counselor in Nepal are walking the talk to a meaningful extent by developing competencies such as i) cognitive and ethical competency, ii) emotional regulation and iii) translation of Knowledge and Skills into Practice. However, this alignment between theory and practice is not absolute. Sometime, it is controlled by internal psychological factors of psychosocial counselors and external systemic factors. These findings are consistent with previous academic literature due to reflecting the personal behaviour, self-awareness, ethical knowledge and work environment influence counselors practice (Corey, 2011; Balci, 2023; Khadka et al., 2025). Most of the authors further show how these factors are negotiated through psychosocial counselors lived professional experiences.

Cognitive and ethical Competence

Firstly, all participants experienced cognitive distortions along with a clear lack of basic understanding about counseling. A counselor experienced catastrophizing thinking that has affected her daily functioning such as felt uncomfortable while receiving phone calls, while counselor observed fear and trauma related to close relatives since her childhood. A third



psychosocial counselor, on the other hand, held a misconception that 'studying psychology makes a person mentally ill', reflecting a common myth about mental health and psychology. This finding is aligned with Cognitive Behavior Theory (CBT) which suggests that individual hold cognitive distortions that influence how people interpret situations (Yao, 2023). After the counseling training, it was observed that counselor's self-doubt, confusion shifted toward greater understanding of life, meaning-making, and professional clarity. Respondents were not aware that what had happened in their life. They did not know which profession to choose and felt uncertain even about the profession they had engaged. Furthermore, their level of self-acceptance, emotionally safety is increased after the training which is highlighted as unconditional positive regards as a key psychological growth of psychosocial counselors. In literature review, most of the authors said that internal factors of **psychosocial** counselors can affect counseling support (Corey, 2011). However, the findings reflect that counselors had already experienced psychological issues before joining the training. The training itself worked like counseling support for the participants which was resulted a better understanding of how to provide counseling to others. Previous literature does not establish that training alone can cause social and emotional changes.

All psychosocial counselors were found to worked in community and school settings and handled students social and emotional difficulties. However, their knowledge about the school counseling program was limited in two dimensions of school counseling such as career counseling and academic development. They mainly focused on the social and emotional development domain while the understanding of career development and academic development was found to be insufficient (ASCA, 2016). These findings suggest a gap between general psycho-social counselling competencies and the broader responsibilities of school counselling which indicates a need of more comprehensive professional preparation. Secondly, ethical awareness is a core concept of professional development in counseling which highlights the principle of confidentiality, boundaries and professional integrity. Literature suggests that psychosocial counselors often encounter ethical dilemmas in practice and ability to manage the situations through critical reflection and supervision (Lee, 2002). However, the findings indicate that all psychosocial counselors followed the professional ethics, set clear boundaries and showed integrity. For example, a psychosocial counselor had clearly set boundaries when clients provided gifts and maintained dual relationships. Counselors cognitively recognizes that accepting gifts may compromise professional integrity. In contrast, another psychosocial counselor was faced some shorts of confusion regarding the theories and real life because a counselor received a marriage proposal from a client's mother which made professional engagement difficult and led to resign. During the interview, psychosocial counselor reported emotional distress associated with leaving the job. Similarly, a counselor experienced cognitive uncertainty during earthquake and COVID-19 pandemic. He asked questions himself 'whether I was following the path of professional or not?' He has reflected the role of ambiguity and decision-making stress. Moreover, another case developed cognitive awareness that counseling involves clear limits and role boundaries,



especially after recognizing emotional over-involvement. Hence, the findings support and extend previous research on ethical practice. Lee (2002) suggests challenges in managing ethical dilemmas while the present findings show that psychosocial counselors generally maintained professional boundaries. However, unexpected interpersonal situations sometimes created emotional and professional uncertainty.

Lastly, in term of translating theory into real-life practice, most of the psychosocial counselors were applied their learning. For instance, a counselor applied person-centric approach (such as emphatic listening, non-judgmental and empathy) in her counseling practices which reflects a clear understanding of counseling principles. Even though, they often faced unexpected situations. It was realized that there was a need for stronger knowledge on risk assessment, safety protocol because a counselor faced difficulties while dealing with sexual boundary violations case. In another case, a psychosocial counselor initially struggled translating the theories in practices due to biasness. Over the time, counselor got experienced and a deeper idea of client-centered approach and cultural sensitivity. These findings align with previous research indicating that professional competence is strengthened through ongoing reflection, practice and supervision rather than being developed through initial training alone (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

From Emotional Vulnerability to Regulation

Before the training, psychosocial counselors seemed to be struggling emotionally disturbed whereas after the training, they were able to regulate their emotions perfectly. For instance, one psychosocial counselor experienced a high level of social isolation because of her anxiety. Another psychosocial counselor reported panic related to issues such as dress code when attending training. Similarly, another psychosocial counselor was initially aiming to join the British Army, and when he was rejected, he experienced identity confusion and was searching for a sense of self. It is aligned with Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity versus role confusion (Orenstein, 2026). As he saw the training notice in local newspaper, he went to inquire about the training immediately. Similarly, one participant tended to focus more on external concerns such as food and clothing rather than emotional processing. Other participants also showed identity development similar to above counselor and after the training they began to understand their personal strengths and values more clearly.

The counseling training helped them develop better emotional awareness and regulation skills. One participant now regularly monitors her emotional states. Another participant has shown improvement in reducing defensive behavior and has become calmer. After entering the counseling field, a counselor has started writing more poems, using poetry as a way to express emotions. Rai has undergone significant emotional transformation; a person who once considered carrying Gun now expresses a desire to become a psychologist.

During the initial counseling practice, all counselors experienced emotionally vulnerable due to their first exposure to real counseling situations. For example, one psychosocial counselor received late-night phone calls from clients and families. She believed that counselors should be available at any time when clients and their families reach out. Another one experienced



shock, emotional distress and emotional burnout because of inappropriate marriage proposal from client families. As a result, she resigned her duty and left the station. The findings indicate that all the changes were made multiple factors such as office engagement, office system, counseling training, regular supervision and positive self-practices of psychosocial counselors. So, all the counselors have been applying in practice what they learned which encouraged them making psychosocial intervention effectively. Analysis of the findings, it is agreed that previous research was focused on self-care, self-awareness and reflection as important for counselor's development (Richards et al., 2010; Chigwedere et al., 2021). The findings also show that emotional regulation is influenced not only by the psychosocial counselor's themselves but also by their workplace environment.

Translation of Knowledge and Skills into Practice

All psychosocial counselors translated knowledge and skills into action. However, their application was depended upon the contextual challenges, emotional demands and need for continues reflective support. For instance, a counselor actively practiced boundary management during the counseling. She educated her clients and families about working hours, emergencies helpline number and refusing unethical gifts. To manage her emotional difficulties, she actively involved in household activities, made herself fun making videos and post in social media. Similarly, another counselor managed her stress applying breathing techniques and self-regulation exercises and changed the station because of unresolved workplace stress. Moreover, they developed listening skills, emotional tolerance and cultural sensitivity. This shift reflects the principle of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2005) where learning occurs through observation, reflections and active experimentation in practice. In another case, psychosocial counselor used to care her self-applying music, emotional distancing technique and provide psychoeducation interventions in school settings. Her ability to coordinate with teachers and support the client environment reflects ecological system thinking (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the integration of counseling into broader community systems. similarly, another counselor applied self-motivation, self-reflection and adopt positive coping response even after uncertainty of the work. These processes reflect the as a protective factor in counselor development which is supporting them for professional learning. Overall, the findings suggest that hands dimension is not limited to technical skill application but also includes behavioral adaptation, emotional regulation in action, supervision-seeking behavior, and reflective engagement. The finding supports the view that professional competence develops through experience, reflection and supervision (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Chae & Backer, 2024). However, the findings suggest that translation of knowledge into practice may be interrupted when psycho-social counselors encounter emotional distress, unclear boundaries, limited risk-assessment knowledge and unsupported workplaces environment.

Conclusion



After reviewing all the findings, it can be concluded that all psychosocial counselors are indeed walking the talk to a meaningful extent and are practicing what they advocate. However, there are some external systematic factors continue to influence their ability to maintain a professional competence. All the psychosocial counselors have developed significant competencies across cognitive, emotional and practical domains. At the cognitive level (head), they have shown increasing understanding about counseling theories, ethical principles, and self-awareness. Most of the psychosocial counselors entered training with cognitive distortions, misconceptions and limited awareness of their own counseling experiences. Through training, supervision and reflective practices, all psychosocial counselors developed clarity in professional identity, improved decision-making and a deeper understanding of self as well as human behavior. This is conformed that six months psychosocial counseling training not only builds technical knowledge but also acts as a transformative learning experience. Relating to school counseling, all psychosocial counselors are working in schools with students, teachers and parents. Their knowledge was limited in two key components of school counseling with a primary focus on the social and emotional domain and insufficient understanding of academic and career development according to ASCA model. All the counselors have limited emphasis on standards, competencies and skills as outlined in the ASCA model.

At the emotional level (heart), psychosocial counselors experienced many struggles with fear, anxiety, identity confusion and unresolved personal issues. over time, they developed emotional awareness, self-regulation, and adopted adaptive coping strategies such as journaling, poetry writing, and mindfulness exercise. Although all psychosocial counselors were found to be emotionally vulnerable during counseling practice, their exposure to clients' trauma, ethical dilemmas, and challenges in maintaining professional boundaries often triggered distress, burnout, and confusion. This reflects that psychosocial counselors have not perfectly in control of their emotions but they learn to handle them over the time.

At the behavior level (hands), psychosocial counselors were able to translate their knowledge and motional learning into practice. Psychosocial counselors demonstrated key counseling skills such as empathy, active listening, boundary setting, and cultural sensitivity based on person-centric approach. They also applied ethical principles of counseling in real-life such as refusing gifts, managing dual relationships and guiding clients towards appropriate services. However, they faced unexpected external challenges such as sexual boundary violations by clients, lack of institutional support, social attitudes, and unclear guidance during emergencies. These difficulties often led to internal challenges such as emotional distress, job resignation, and ethical dilemmas, highlighting a gap between theory and practice. The organizations that mobilize psychosocial counselors do not seem to play a significant role in supporting them. It seems that there is little evidence of adequate institutional support for psychosocial counselors. There was a belief that once training is completed, psychosocial counselors are expected to deal every aspect. Even highly motivated and trained psychosocial counselors struggled when supportive systems were weak. Those



who engaged continues supervision, self-care and reflective practice were better able to maintain professional integrity and effectiveness.

Hence, the study highlights that investment in both individual capacity and systemic support is essential. There is an urgent need for continues professional support including regular supervision, personal therapy opportunities, refresher training and safe working environments. Managing these systems will strengthen counselors' internal challenges and able to work in complex field realities more effectively. Additionally, before being mobilized to schools, psychosocial counselors should be trained in the ASCA model or include their course syllabus, so that their competencies can be effectively developed if mobilize them in the school.

Furthermore, policy-level interventions are required to institutionalize counseling services within the existing government system and formally recognize psychosocial counselors, ensuring that psychosocial counselors are not only adequately trained but also receive continue professional support through their careers.

Implications

1. The finding indicates that psychosocial counselors need ongoing professional growth beyond initial six months psychosocial counseling training. While the 780-hour training builds foundational knowledge, psychosocial counselors require continuous supervision, self-reflection, and self-care practices to effectively translate theory into practice. This highlights that “walking the talk” is a lifelong developmental and ongoing process rather than a one-time achievement.
2. The study reveal that there was lack of organizational knowledge and support which significantly affects psychosocial counselors’ ability to practice effectively. Hence, organizations must ensure internal factors eg: emotional state and external factors such as regular supervision, safe working environments, access to personal healing, and clear guidelines for handling ethical and emergency situations. Without such support, even well-trained psychosocial counselors face emotional distress, ethical dilemmas, and workplace burnout.
3. At the policy level, there is a need to institutionalize psychosocial counseling services in Nepal. This includes developing national standards, integrating counseling into schools and communities, and incorporating comprehensive models like the ASCA framework in training. Strengthening both training content and system-level policies such as authorization as well as licensing mechanism of will enhance psychosocial counselors’ competencies and service quality.

Author Contributions

Sudip Ghimire conceptualized the study, conducted the literature review, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, and prepared and revised the manuscript. Shree Krishna Wagle, Ph.D provided academic supervision, methodological guidance, critical feedback, and manuscript review.



Acknowledgements

The author sincerely acknowledges the guidance and support of Kathmandu University, School of Counseling team, Dr. Shree and the valuable contributions of my colleagues Aleena, Amit, Bhumika, Deepa, Dinesh, Gunanidi, Krit, Nischit, Pratibha, Puja, Puskar, Yukta, Proshan, Seema, Uttam, Jamuna, and Muna throughout the research process. Special thanks are extended to my wife Bhagawati Poudel, son Abhisu Ghimire, and daughter Abhisu Ghimire for their patience, encouragement, and continuous support during the research and manuscript preparation. Special thanks to the four Psychosocial counselors whose experiences and valuable insights contributed significantly to the completion of this paper.

Transparency Statement: The authors confirm that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

Funding: The study received no external funding.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares there is no conflict of interest.



References

- Balci, S. (2023). Importance of ethics for the counseling profession: Metaphorical perceptions of counselor candidates, 22(88).
- Bevly, D. E. A. (2024). A phenomenological exploration of counselors' experiences in personal therapy. [Journal name/details need to be added], 181–197.
<https://doi.org/10.15241/db.14.2.181>
- Butina, M. (2015). A narrative approach to qualitative inquiry. *Clinical Laboratory Science*, 28(3).
- Corey, G. (2011). *Issues and ethics in the helping professions* (42–75).
- Dailey, S. F. (2018). *Counselor self-awareness and counselor communication*.
- Gazibara, S. (2013). Head, heart and hands learning: A challenge for contemporary education. *Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, 71–81.
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). (2008). *IASC guidelines on mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings*.
- Jordans, M. J. (2007). Psychosocial counselling in Nepal: Perspectives of counsellors and beneficiaries. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 57–68.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-006-9028-z>
- Khadka, J. (2025). Practice and effectiveness of guidance and counseling in Nepali schools: Roles of learning strategy, self-management, and social skills. *Frontiers in Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1548424>
- Rai, Y. (2021). Insight and challenges: Mental health services in Nepal. *BJPsych International*.
<https://doi.org/10.1192/bji.2020.58>
- Richards, K. C. (2010). Self-care and well-being in mental health professionals: The mediating effects of self-awareness and mindfulness, 247–264.
- Rønnestad, M. H. (2023). *The journey of the counselor and therapist: Research findings and perspectives on professional development*.
- Satyal, S. (2025). Exploring school counseling experiences concerning teachers' involvement in school counseling: A qualitative study. *NPRC Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*.
- Zauszniewski, J. A. (1999). Depressive cognitions and psychosocial functioning: A test of Beck's cognitive theory. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 13(5), 286–293.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-9417\(99\)80060-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-9417(99)80060-0)

Views and opinions expressed in this article are the views and opinions of the author(s), *NPRC Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.