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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Professional needs of psychological counsellors in China: a comprehensive investigation utilising the ERG theory

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ABSTRACT

Based on the ERG (Existence, Relatedness and Growth) theory, a scale was developed to evaluate the professional needs of psychological counsellors in China and its related factors were explored. A total of 209 counsellors participated in the study and completed two online questionnaires. The majority of participants were female ($n = 163$, 78%). The average age of participants is 41.00 ($SD = 8.66$). The results showed that the existence needs ($\bar{x} = 4.49$, $SD = 0.60$), relatedness needs ($\bar{x} = 4.20$, $SD = 0.65$) and growth needs ($\bar{x} = 4.66$, $SD = 0.50$) of counsellors were all at a high level. Work setting, marital status and regular supervision had a significant influence on the professional needs of counsellors. Counsellors working in private practice had more existence and growth needs compared to those working in institutions. Counsellors, who were married, had more existence and relatedness needs than those who were single. Counsellors without regular supervision had more existence, relatedness and growth needs.

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Introduction

Counselling, as a profession, approximately originated in the 1950s, and rapid global development is a major trend in the profession (Brady-Amoon & Keefe-Cooperman, 2017; Grabosky et al., 2012; Hohenshil, 2010). The development of psychology in modern China has followed a long and challenging path. The first department of psychology in China was established in 1920, during a period of turmoil (Guo & Yan, 2020). Since the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, clinical and counselling psychology in China has experienced rapid growth (Hou & Zhang, 2007; Wang et al., 2022). Psychological counselling is a specialised profession that utilises psychological theories and skills to assist clients in addressing their mental health issues. With the rapid development of society, the importance and demands for mental health services have significantly increased (Liang et al., 2018). In recent years, mental health services have played a critical role in addressing the trauma caused by the unexpected outbreak of COVID-19 (Moreno et al., 2020). Psychological counsellors, as providers of mental health services, have become an indispensable force in promoting mental healthcare systems.

However, the rapid development of psychological counselling also comes with challenges that cannot be ignored. One significant career challenge is burnout, which is an inevitable result due

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to the nature of counselling work (Herlihy & Dufrene, 2011; Kim et al., 2024). Working with distressed clients and complex problems, counsellors have to provide empathy, support and companionship daily, which may lead to stress and job burnout (Everall & Paulson, 2004; Mullen et al., 2017). Burnout has a negative impact on counsellors themselves and their ability to provide professional and effective counselling services (Kim et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2007). Therefore, it is important to provide support for counsellors to address and prevent burnout.

Self-determination theory indicates that human motivation has a great impact on well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Satisfaction of needs is related to increasing interest in activities, otherwise, people's psychological well-being will be impaired (Ryan et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Mental health needs have been identified as one of the predictors of burnout among school counsellors (Junek, 2020). The job demands-resources (JD-R) model is widely used to understand burnout across human service professions (Demerouti et al., 2001). This model proposes that burnout arises when job demands are high and job resources are limited (Demerouti et al., 2001). Previous studies have found that job demands are related to burnout among school counsellors and counsellors in training (Bardhoshi & Um, 2021; Um & Bardhoshi, 2022). Some studies have found that the JD-R model is related to needs satisfaction (Chen & Wu, 2022; Maas et al., 2022). Based on the definition of the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001), it can be interpreted that job demands refer to what the job requires in practice, while job resources refer to what can help to achieve job goals. For example, school counsellors may be required to take on a heavy workload (job demands) but the school can offer some rewards for them (job resources). Both workload and rewards are the components of existence needs, and existence needs satisfaction may depend on the interaction of workload and rewards. However, the JD-R model only focuses on the needs in the workplace but neglects some individual needs which are also important in the work, such as social support from family members. Therefore, focus on psychological counsellors, to prevent them from getting into burnout and promote well-being and development in their work, it is meaningful to comprehensively understand their professional needs.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is one of the most acknowledged and influential psychological theories, which categorises human needs into five dimensions: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). Expanding upon Maslow's theory, Alderfer introduced the Existence Relatedness Growth (ERG) theory, which consists of three fundamental needs: existence, relatedness and growth (Alderfer, 1969). The ERG theory expands the application of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and serves as a valuable tool for analysing people's needs and improves their performance in the workplace (Caulton, 2012).

According to the framework of the ERG theory, the professional needs of counsellors can be divided into three categories. Firstly, existence needs encompass physiological and material necessities (Alderfer, 1969). For counsellors, their existence needs are mainly concerned with income, safety and workload. An investigation has shown that counsellors in national health service often have low earnings and sometimes may have to work unpaid hours. Counsellors leave their positions for one significant reason that they are concerned about ethical safety (Ryan et al., 2019). Secondly, relatedness needs primarily include the interpersonal relationship and social support (Alderfer, 1969). For counsellors, their relatedness needs are mostly related to social support from family members and friends and connections with clients and coworkers. Previous studies have found that social support can serve as a protective factor against burnout (Newton et al., 2020), and counsellors, who receive support from family members, friends and coworkers, tend to experience lower levels of burnout (Ducharme et al., 2007; Gündüz, 2012; Newton et al., 2020; Yildirim, 2008). Lastly, growth needs refer to the desire for self-worth realisation and self-development (Alderfer, 1969; Cheung et al., 2021). Counsellors' growth needs encompass the knowledge and opportunities for professional development, such as receiving training, practising skills and obtaining a professional licence. These three needs can motivate employee's work attitude and performance (Yang & Ling, 2023).

Scale or questionnaire was the most common method to detect professional needs based on the ERG theory. Two previous studies have created their questionnaire based on the ERG theory by

extracting some related items from a large sample survey to evaluate the professional needs of social workers and young university teachers, respectively (Hanra et al., 2019; Yang & Ling, 2023). A previous study developed a standardised scale based on ERG theory to evaluate the professional needs of rural doctors (Shanmugapriya et al., 2023). However, there is currently no standardised scale to evaluate the professional needs of counsellors. In previous studies about the professional needs of counsellors, researchers simply pieced together some questions and other scales without any framework of needs theory to represent the professional needs (Bardhoshi & Um, 2021; Um & Bardhoshi, 2022). As a result, this approach may not comprehensively evaluate the professional needs of counsellors. Furthermore, a study has reported that some questions based on the ERG theory were used to evaluate the needs of school counsellors (Jones & Pijanowski, 2023), but it did not provide any details regarding the reliability or validity of the questions.

In conclusion, due to the challenge of burnout and its association with professional needs, it is meaningful and important to understand the professional needs of counsellors. This study aimed to develop a scale based on the ERG theory to evaluate the professional needs of psychological counsellors. A comprehensive investigation was carried out among psychological counsellors to evaluate their professional needs and explore the related factors.

Method

Participants

Participants were self-identified psychological counsellors working in China. Data were collected from September 2021 to January 2022. Ultimately, 219 psychological counsellors were recruited through WeChat and they completed two online questionnaires. Ten participants, who failed to provide the correct answer to the screening question (Please choose “No” in this question), were excluded from the study. Therefore, a total of 209 questionnaires (95.43%) were included in the final data analysis.

Measures

Counsellor’s professional characteristics questionnaire

This questionnaire was developed based on two previous studies on similar topics (Eckart & Ziomek-Daigle, 2019; Goodyear et al., 2008), taking into account the professional cultural background in China. This questionnaire included demographic items, such as age and gender, as well as professional items such as work form and supervision. To ensure the applicability of the questions, a pilot test was conducted by the last two authors with several counsellor colleagues.

Counsellor’s professional needs scale (CPNS)

The process of item development involved two main steps: (1) conceptualisation and item generation; and (2) content validity (Boateng et al., 2018). Professional needs were conceptualised based on the ERG theory. The items of CPNS were generated by the first two authors through deductive and inductive approaches. For the deductive approach, previous literature was explored to generate items, such as counsellors’ concerns about ethical safety reported in a previous study (Ryan et al., 2019) inspired us to generate an item “Work affiliation provides more control and assistance on ethical issues”. For the inductive approach, semi-structured interviews conducted with four counsellors were used to generate items. During these interviews, counsellors were asked about the difficulties, challenges and needs they encountered in their counselling work. Lastly, to ensure content validity, two senior counselling psychologists and two graduate students majoring in psychology from one of the largest psychiatric hospitals in China were invited to review and evaluate the validity of the scale. After two rounds of modification, a total of 22 items (Supplementary Table 1) were finally formed for measurement. The scale adopted a 5-point Likert measurement (1-do not need at all, 5-very much need), higher scores indicated more needs.

Data analyses

All the analyses were conducted in SPSS 25.0. Screen plots and parallel analyses (Reise et al., 2000; Zwick & Velicer, 1986) were used to determine the number of factors. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to screen items of CPNS. Items that loaded less (< 0.40) on one factor or that loaded moderately (≥ 0.40) on more than one factor were excluded. After screening items, another EFA was conducted to explore the structural validity. Both EFAs employed principal component analysis and direct oblimin rotation as the methods of factor extraction. Cronbach's α was calculated to assess the reliability of CPNS.

In descriptive statistical analysis, frequencies and percentages were used to describe categorical variables. Means and standard deviations were used to describe continuous variables. Student's t -test or analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare professional needs scores in different characteristics. Bonferroni correction was used to adjust for multiple comparisons. Multivariate regression analyses were conducted to detect the correlation between professional characteristics and professional needs. The backward method was used to select an appropriate regression model. Two-tailed $p < 0.05$ was considered as statistical significance.

Results

Analytic procedure of CPNS

To validate a scale, the sample size should be at least five times greater than the number of items (Anthoine et al., 2014). As the CPNS consists of 22 items, the sample size in this study ($N = 209$) is deemed sufficient for conducting reliability and validity analyses.

Items analysis

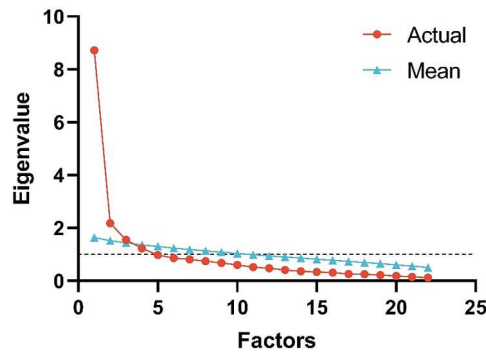
The correlations between the item score and its subscale (existence, relatedness and growth) score were calculated for item discrimination. Items with item-subscale correlation coefficients below 0.4 were excluded. However, the results indicated that no items had to be excluded.

Construct validity

The results of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Test ($KMO = 0.88$) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($\chi^2_{(231)} = 2676.10$, $p < 0.001$) confirmed that the CPNS data were suitable for EFA. Screen plots and parallel analysis were used to determine the number of factors. As shown in Figure 1, the mean eigenvalue of the simulation was higher than the actual eigenvalue at the fourth factor, so the ideal number of factors is three. Load values of the original 22 items on the three factors are presented in Supplementary Table 1. The three factors were existence, growth and relatedness. Factor loadings of item 22 were less than 0.40 and item 8 loaded on more than one factor with factor loadings more than 0.40. Therefore, these two items were excluded. In addition, according to the theoretical construction, eight items (items 6, 9, 10 and 17–21) that did not predominantly load on the initially designed factors were also excluded. As a result, 12 items were retained: 5 items for existence needs, 3 items for relatedness needs and 4 items for growth needs (Table 2). Another EFA was conducted for the 12 remained items. The $KMO = 0.81$, $\chi^2_{(231)} = 1189.03$, $p < 0.001$ and the three extracted factors accounted for 65.62% of the total variance.

Reliability

The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's α) of CPNS was 0.85. Specifically, Cronbach's α was 0.84 for the existence subscale, 0.74 for the relatedness subscale and 0.83 for the growth subscale, which indicated that CPNS had great reliability.

Figure 1. Screen plot and parallel analysis.

Note: Actual: the actual eigenvalues; Mean: the mean value of the simulated eigenvalues for 1000 times.

Professional characteristics

In Table 1, the professional characteristics of the participants are presented. In this investigation, the majority of the participants were female ($n = 163$, 78.0%). The mean age was 41.00 years ($SD = 8.66$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of professional characteristics.

Characteristics	<i>N</i> (%) / \bar{X} (<i>SD</i>)	Characteristics	<i>N</i> (%)
Age	41.00 (8.66)	Major	
Gender		Psychology	75 (35.9)
male	46 (22.0)	Medicine	61 (29.2)
female	163 (78.0)	Others	73 (34.9)
Marital status		Monthly income (yuan)	
Single	37 (17.7)	<5000	37 (17.7)
Married	172 (82.3)	5000–10,000	79 (37.8)
Educational degree		10,000–20,000	55 (26.3)
Bachelor and below	118 (56.5)	≥20,000	30 (14.4)
Master and above	91 (43.5)	Missing	8 (3.8)
Work form		Regular supervision	
Full-time	92 (44)	Yes	171 (81.8)
Part-time	117 (56)	No	38 (18.2)
Work setting		Fees per hour of counselling (yuan)	
In institutions	153 (73.2)	<100	48 (23.0)
In private practice	56 (26.8)	100–300	42 (20.1)
Work years		300–500	61 (29.2)
<3	67 (32.1)	>500	58 (27.8)
3–6	43 (20.6)	Monthly income of counselling (yuan)	
6–10	47 (22.5)	<1000	81 (38.8)
≥10	52 (24.9)	1000–5000	60 (28.7)
Clients per week		>5000	68 (32.5)
<5	116 (55.5)	Hours per week for self-improvement	
5–10	51 (24.4)	<5	60 (28.7)
>10	42 (20.1)	5–10	85 (40.7)
Hours of individual counselling		10–15	33 (15.8)
<100	37 (17.7)	≥15	31 (14.8)
100–500	58 (27.8)	Costs per month for self-improvement (yuan)	
500–1000	33 (15.8)	<500	51 (24.4)
1000–3000	39 (18.7)	500–1000	49 (23.4)
>3000	42 (20.1)	1000–3000	61 (29.2)
Hours of group counselling		>3000	48 (23.0)
<100	139 (66.5)		
100–500	39 (18.7)		
>500	31 (14.8)		

More than half of the participants ($n = 108$, 51.7%) held a bachelor's degree or below, while 43.6% ($n = 91$) held a master's degree or higher.

Among the 209 participants, 44% ($n = 92$) were employed as full-time counsellors, while 56.0% ($n = 117$) worked as part-time counsellors. The majority of the participants ($n = 153$, 73.2%) were employed in institutions, while only 26.8% ($n = 56$) worked in private practice. 32.1% ($n = 67$) of the participants had less than 3 years of experience, while 24.9% ($n = 52$) had been working for more than 10 years. Among the participants, 81.8% ($n = 171$) reported receiving regular supervision.

Related factors of professional needs

The results of descriptive statistical analysis are presented in Table 2. The highest professional needs were the growth needs ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 0.504$), then were existence needs ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.50$) and relatedness needs ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.65$). The comparison results of professional needs with different characteristics are presented in Table 3. There were no significant differences in the professional development needs and subscales among counsellors of different genders and educational backgrounds.

Single counsellors had significantly higher existence needs ($t = -3.207$, $p = 0.002$) than married counsellors. Counsellors, who worked in institutions, had significantly higher existence needs ($t = -2.866$, $p = 0.005$) and growth needs ($t = -2.949$, $p = 0.004$). Counsellors, who did not receive regular supervision, had significantly higher existence needs ($t = 2.647$, $p = 0.009$), relatedness needs ($t = 4.959$, $p < 0.001$) and growth needs ($t = 2.155$, $p = 0.032$).

Correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between all characteristics and professional needs, and results were presented in Supplementary Table 2. Marital status ($r = 0.205$, $p = 0.003$), working setting ($r = 0.195$, $p = 0.005$), regular supervision ($r = -0.181$, $p = 0.009$) were significantly correlated with existence needs. Marital status ($r = 0.142$, $p = 0.040$) and regular supervision ($r = -0.304$, $p < 0.001$) were significantly correlated with relatedness needs. Working setting ($r = 0.201$, $p = 0.004$) and regular supervision ($r = -0.148$, $p = 0.032$) were significantly correlated

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and load values of 12 items in CPNS.

Items	Factors			Mean	SD
	E	R	G		
1. Increase the income of psychological counsellors	0.512	0.175	0.177	4.25	0.82
2. Get more cost-effective psychological counselling learning and training opportunities	0.789	-0.084	0.111	4.31	0.72
3. Get more cost-effective personal experience or supervision opportunities	0.831	-0.200	0.153	4.05	0.87
4. Reduce stress and responsibilities outside of your job description	0.788	0.047	-0.157	4.63	0.64
5. Work affiliation provides more control and assistance on ethical issues	0.763	0.165	0.021	4.74	0.57
Existence needs				4.49	0.60
6. Obtain support and understanding from family members and friends for psychological counselling work	0.130	0.628	-0.063	.130	.628
7. Obtain the clients' satisfaction and affirmation for the psychological counselling work	-0.081	0.879	0.023	-.081	.879
8. Obtain the satisfaction and affirmation from the family members of the client for the counselling work	-0.051	0.882	0.085	-.051	.882
Relatedness needs				4.20	0.65
9. Provide more professional development opportunities and employment paths for psychological counsellors	0.076	0.034	0.803	4.59	0.74
10. Establish a sound professional development system for psychological counsellors	-0.084	0.004	0.961	4.61	0.73
11. Develop and implement feasible professional development plans for psychological counselling	0.020	-0.083	0.912	4.31	0.89
12. Acquire cutting-edge knowledge and relevant information on professional development	0.154	0.175	0.417	4.43	0.78
Growth needs				4.66	0.50
Professional Development Needs				4.47	0.45

Notes: CPNS = Counsellor's Professional Needs Scale; E = existence; R = relatedness; G = growth; load value was bolded if ≥ 0.4 .

Table 3. Comparison of professional needs in different characteristics.

	Existence needs <i>M (SD)</i>	Relatedness needs <i>M (SD)</i>	Growth needs <i>M (SD)</i>
Gender			
Male (<i>N</i> = 46)	4.47 (0.61)	4.20 (0.67)	4.64 (0.52)
Female (<i>N</i> = 163)	4.53 (0.46)	4.22 (0.59)	4.71 (0.42)
<i>t</i>	−0.511	−0.156	−0.824
Age (<i>N</i> = 209)			
<i>r</i>	0.162	0.064	0.090
Education			
Bachelor and below (<i>N</i> = 118)	4.48 (0.56)	4.23 (0.65)	4.70 (0.41)
Master and above (<i>N</i> = 91)	4.49 (0.65)	4.17 (0.66)	4.60 (0.60)
<i>t</i>	−0.084	0.624	1.491
Marital status			
Single	4.21 (0.82)	4.02 (0.71)	4.53 (0.66)
Married	4.54 (0.53)	4.24 (0.63)	4.69 (0.46)
<i>t</i>	−3.207**	−1.932	−1.659
Work setting			
In institutions (<i>N</i> = 153)	4.29 (0.63)	4.10 (0.69)	4.49 (0.52)
In private practice (<i>N</i> = 56)	4.56 (0.57)	4.24 (0.63)	4.72 (0.48)
<i>t</i>	−2.866**	−1.469	−2.949**
Regular supervision			
No (<i>N</i> = 38)	4.72 (0.52)	4.62 (0.52)	4.82 (0.40)
Yes (<i>N</i> = 171)	4.44 (0.61)	4.11 (0.64)	4.62 (0.52)
<i>t</i>	2.647**	4.595***	2.155*

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Regression analysis of professional needs.

	Unstandardised β	Standardised β	<i>F</i>	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Existence needs					
Marital status	0.148**	0.191	7.435***	0.098	0.085
Work setting	0.235*	0.174			
Regular supervision	−0.215*	−0.139			
Relatedness needs					
Marital status	0.097	0.055	12.196***	0.106	0.097
Regular supervision	−0.494***	0.111			
Growth needs					
Work setting	0.208**	0.183	5.970**	0.055	0.046
Regular supervision	−0.158	−0.122			

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

with growth needs. These variables were included as independent variables in three separate backward regression analyses. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 4. Marital status (standardised $\beta = 0.191$, $p = 0.005$), work setting (standardised $\beta = 0.174$, $p = 0.010$) and regular supervision (standardised $\beta = -0.139$, $p = 0.041$) were independently associated with the existence needs. Marital status (standardised $\beta = 0.116$, $p = 0.081$) and regular supervision (standardised $\beta = -0.294$, $p < 0.001$) were independently associated with relatedness needs. Working setting (standardised $\beta = 0.183$, $p = 0.008$) and regular supervision (standardised $\beta = -0.122$, $p = 0.077$) were independently associated with growth needs.

Discussion

This study has developed a scale (CPNS) based on the ERG theory to evaluate counsellor's professional needs. This scale contains three subscales, which refer to three kinds of professional needs. Firstly, the existence needs of counsellors are mostly related to income, affordable learning opportunities, workload and ethical safety. Income and affordable learning opportunities are interconnected, and both of them can impact counsellors' actual earnings. Previous studies indicated that

counsellors were not well paid (Ryan et al., 2019), but they do require training and supervision in practical work. Thus, affordable and cheap training is highly desirable for them. A heavy workload can lead to burnout among counsellors (DeDiego et al., 2023; Ricks & Brannon, 2023), leaving insufficient time for relaxation. Counsellors inevitably have to face ethical issues in their work, and ethical issues are emerging and changing with time (Herlihy & Dufrene, 2011). However, ethical decision-making is a multidimensional and often complex process (Levitt et al., 2015), and organisational support may enhance counsellors' sense of ethical safety. For example, a previous study has shown that organisational support for ethical competence improved nurse's ethical safety and job satisfaction (Poikkeus et al., 2020). Secondly, the relatedness needs of counsellors are mostly related to the social support from family members and the satisfaction from their clients. Social support had a great impact on an individual's psychological well-being (Quevedo & Abella, 2010), and support from family members can mitigate job burnout (Fiorilli et al., 2019). Clients' satisfaction serves as another important social support for counsellors as helping others is usually their primary motivation for choosing this profession (Barton, 2023). Thirdly, the growth needs of counsellors mainly involve opportunities and knowledge for professional development. A previous study revealed that searching for recognition is the core faith of counsellor's professional development, which can be divided into two aspects: internal recognition including learning skills and knowledge, or more generally self-improvement; external recognition including recognition from senior counsellors, licence or certification from national institutions and associations (Carlsson et al., 2011). Thus, counsellors are keen on pursuing opportunities and knowledge for professional development to fulfil their growth needs.

Professional characteristics of counsellors also be investigated in this study. Gender difference among psychological counsellors was found in this study, with a higher proportion of female counsellors compared to male counsellors. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have also reported gender disparities in the counselling profession (Goodyear et al., 2008; Lichtenberg et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017). Moreover, we found that the majority of psychological counsellors in this study held a bachelor's degree, which aligns with findings from previous investigations conducted in China (Chen et al., 2018; Shu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2017). However, studies conducted in the United States have shown that a master's degree is the predominant educational degree for psychological counsellors (Eckart & Ziomek-Daigle, 2019). This discrepancy may be attributed to the neglect of academic education for psychological counsellors in China. However, with the establishment of China's first School of Clinical and Counseling Psychology in 2020 (Wang et al., 2022), this situation may be improved gradually.

This study indicated that counsellor's professional needs were at a high level, and the growth needs were the most urgent. According to the ERG theory, individuals can have multiple types of needs simultaneously (Alderfer, 1969). Even though the existence needs have not been fully satisfied, counsellors can still pursue relatedness and growth needs. Work setting is the related factor of existence and growth needs. Counsellors in private practice tend to have more existence and growth needs compared to those working in institutions. Financial issues and the desire for self-improvement may be more common among counsellors in private practice. Counsellors in private practice have to face many challenges: searching for offices and deciding to buy or rent them, developing and sustaining a certain number of cases through a referral base, identifying a marketable niche and so on (Reese et al., 2013). Marital status is also an important related factor in counsellors' existence and relatedness needs. Married counsellors, especially females, tend to have more existence and relatedness needs compared to single counsellors. Married counsellors, especially female counsellors, have to balance family and work. Looking after family members had a great influence on female counsellors' work (Eckart & Ziomek-Daigle, 2019). Therefore, married counsellors may need more financial support and recognition from co-workers. Regular supervision plays an important part in all three professional needs. Counsellors who did not receive regular supervision, were more likely to have higher existence, relatedness and growth needs. Supervision serves as an essential professional support system for counsellors

(Chen et al., 2018; Stoltenberg, 2005). Receiving regular supervision can effectively satisfy the counsellor's professional needs.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. (1) The validity of CPNS needs a further confirmatory factor analysis with a new set of data, which would help to establish the reliability and validity of the scale. (2) Most of the participants come from the eastern area of China which is economically developed. The development of counselling is significant disequilibrium among different areas in China (Qian et al., 2008). Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalising the study findings to all counsellors in China. (3) The settings of some options in this investigation were not sufficiently reasonable. For example, in the question of "clients per week", 55.5% of participants chose "less than 5", indicating that there may be a floor effect in this question and the options should be further subdivided to provide more accurate data. (4) the investigation adopted two self-report questionnaires, which relied on the honesty of participants and may be influenced by desirability bias.

Conclusions

The professional needs of psychological counsellors are at a high level. Regular supervision, work setting and marital status have significant influences on counsellors' professional needs. To effectively address the professional needs of counsellors in China, it is recommended to focus on providing regular supervision for counsellors.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are publicly available. The corresponding author can be contacted upon reasonable request.

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