The Role of AI in Counseling

Counselor's Perspective

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White Paper

The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Counseling: PARC AI Regulatory Research Team Embarks on Finding Answers

The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) Policy, Advocacy, and Research in Counseling Center (PARC) recognizes the pace at which artificial intelligence (AI) is developing in the United Sates and the world. It is clear that many counselors have concerns regarding the rapid growth of AI in school and mental health settings. Our goal at PARC is to ensure that technological advancements serve to enhance, not compromise, client well-being and to provide high-level support to trained professionals. There are valid concerns about ethical and practical challenges relating to AI, including data privacy, bias, and the risk of dehumanization in care, among other particularly important issues. Concerns of this nature deserve a practical approach that is thoughtful and led by evidence-based research and analysis.

NBCC has previously provided the following resources on the topic of AI to support the needs of National Certified Counselors and our colleagues:

- Ethical Principles for Artificial Intelligence in Counseling
- Comparative Analysis of AI Guidelines in Professional Counseling
- Shaping the Future: Policy Recommendations to Support Professional Counseling in the Age of Artificial Intelligence
- Ethical Use of AI in Counseling Practice
- The Inevitable Future of Artificial Intelligence in Counseling

National Certified Counselors have the expertise to inform other professionals about how the development of future AI may impact the profession as well as to guide current and future counselors in the ever-changing AI landscape. AI has the potential to transform mental health services, but it must be integrated thoughtfully, ethically, and responsibly. PARC has taken the initiative to bring together some of our nation's leading counseling experts to obtain the answers counselors and other mental health professionals need. As our team of diverse researchers pioneers this project on behalf of the profession, PARC will continue to provide updates on their progress and the impact of their research on the profession. Now that we have embarked on this project, we would like to introduce the team and hear directly from the team leaders who will help move this project forward over the next several months.

Let's meet the AI Regulatory Research Team Members:

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Team Lead: AI Regulatory Research
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Now let's hear directly from our team leaders with a preview of what you can expect from our research. Their combined expertise, along with that of NBCC's Director of Ethics, Dr. Brenden Hargett, will help us with key challenges, opportunities, and ethical considerations, shaping this innovative and what we hope will be groundbreaking approach to the inclusion of counselor expertise in the ever-changing AI and health care landscape.

Dr. Cody Dickson (Regulatory Research Lead):

Q: As AI technologies become more integrated into mental health care, what are some of the most pressing regulatory challenges you believe need immediate attention to protect both clients and practitioners?

A: *Foremost concern is the absence of clear and comprehensive regulatory frameworks specifically governing AI's use in mental health care. The concept of regulation can often be a daunting endeavor, as social and professional responses to regulations are often met with skepticism and concern, especially in relation to health care issues. While some existing legislation attempts to address some aspects of AI, it often falls short in covering the unique challenges posed by AI technologies, especially regarding their impact on human relationships and emotions. The recent Wellness and Oversight for Psychological Resources Act of Illinois, prohibiting the use of AI therapeutic decision-making interventions, may be a positive move until some concerns have the time to be answered by the technology and clinical communities. An additional example is the first comprehensive law to arise from this technological push comes, the European Union AI Act of 2024, which classifies AI systems in three categories based on risk; however, the effectiveness in addressing the broader implications of AI in mental health remains to be seen. As a profession, we need to define the duty of care for AI-based therapeutic services operating with or without human therapists. Currently, there are too many ambiguities in responsibility, which can negatively impact clients and practitioners. We have an urgent ethical need for new guiding frameworks that are flexible enough to adapt to the rapid technological and social changes brought by AI.*

Q: How do you see existing counseling ethical frameworks guiding the development of new policies and regulations around AI use in mental health settings?

A: *Existing and future counseling ethical standards are crucial for guiding the development of new policies and regulations for AI implementation. Our ethical frameworks provide aspirational principles with an emphasis on respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice, and responsibility. These principles must be considered when implementing AI in the profession. Additionally, ethical standards provide foundational principles that address data security, client and counselor well-being, and responsible implementation of technology, among other salient concerns. It is imperative to establish clear and universal ethical guidelines and policies for AI use in mental health to balance innovation with ethics. Our guidelines should protect patient rights, ensure equitable access, and maintain transparency in AI applications. Finally, ethical principles help ensure AI innovations enhance clinical services while safeguarding privacy, dignity, and access to equitable care.*

Q: What role should counselors and professional organizations play in shaping the legislative and regulatory landscape for AI in mental health care?

A: *Counselors and professional organizations should actively engage in shaping the legislative and regulatory landscape for AI in mental health care to ensure ethical implementation and protect client and counselor well-being. This involvement is crucial for establishing clear guidance and standards for AI technologies in counseling. Counselors are uniquely positioned to influence AI legislation and regulation due to their direct involvement in mental health care and understanding of human relationships. The roles of counselors include advocacy, ethics, policy development, and protecting human-relational connections. The fulfillment of these roles is built through clinical therapeutic alliances with our clients and developing affiliation with our communities, state and federal lawmakers, community leaders, and stakeholders.*

Professional counseling organizations play a significant part in shaping AI legislation and regulation by representing the collective interests and expertise of mental health professionals. Professional organizations like the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) are working to establish clear guidance for AI regulations concerning counselors. Professional organizations, together with counselors, should work with regulatory boards and agencies to ensure proper budgets are allocated to the mental health system to implement AI services and research with ethical oversight.

Q: At the conclusion of this research, do you believe your findings will not only support the counseling profession but our sister professions in social work and psychology as well? If so, how?

A: *I love this question. As of today, I am personally working with professionals from several specializations in psychology, marriage and family therapy, and social work to ensure that there is a strong degree of autonomy and collaboration on AI-related issues in the mental health fields. As the "mental health sisters" provide similar services from different perspectives, we share the ethical focus on the well-being of our clients and communities. As we look at this research ethically and methodically, we expect that any research guided by our principles and objective lens will bear fruit that benefits the mental health field as a whole, regardless of the professional orientation. This goes beyond the issues related to AI and more to a collaborative move towards protecting our clients and communities from any forms of harm.*

I am honored to work with PARC and this team of counseling professions to move the discussion and practice of AI in clinical and training services forward during this time of great development. I reflect on past inventions within development that ushered in significant change coupled with excitement and trepidation. I see we are chasing a fast-moving train in AI technology, and I am excited to help in a small way to impact the counseling profession.

Dr. Seneka Gainer (Counselor Training Lead):

Q: Why is it essential to incorporate training on AI and its ethical use into counselor education programs?

A: *AI is already reshaping clinical work and education; training ensures counselors can vet tools, protect privacy, and keep the human relationship primary (CACREP, 2024; HAI, 2025). Explicit AI education operationalizes our existing ethics, including competence, confidentiality, and informed consent, inside technological contexts so counselors can act with clarity and courage for client welfare (ACA, 2014; NBCC, 2025). Done well, AI training in counselor education programs does not dilute our strengths in empathy and cultural care; it amplifies them by giving counselors the language, skills, and boundaries to use technology responsibly (ACA, 2014).*

Q: What specific skills or knowledge should future counselors acquire to utilize AI tools confidently and responsibly in their practice?

A: *Counselors need foundational AI literacy and human-in-the-loop judgment, which is the ability to interpret outputs and make client-centered decisions with explicit oversight (APA, 2025; ACA, 2014). Concretely, secure data handling (de-identify PHI, use HIPAA/BAA-covered platforms, never paste client info into public chatbots), bias awareness (test outputs across identities, document mitigation steps), empathy and cultural responsiveness (obtain informed consent, honor opt-outs, adapt/decline AI when it conflicts with a client's values), and creative application (leveraging AI to generate culturally relevant psychoeducation materials, role-play scenarios, or visual aids that deepen engagement; NBCC, 2025; APA, 2025). These skills ensure AI supports care rather than steering it and help counselors use the tools confidently and responsibly.*

Q: How can training programs balance the benefits of AI with the potential risks, ensuring counselors are prepared to navigate both effectively and ethically?

A: *Teach an empathy-led, evidence-checked, safety-bounded approach: use AI where it serves clients (e.g., note drafting, accessibility supports), paired with guardrails such as no PHI in public tools, explicit informed consent, supervisor/faculty review of AI outputs, and the ability to practice fully without the tech when needed (ACA, 2014; NBCC, 2025). Build this through scenario labs that surface bias and privacy dilemmas, require documented reasoning and corrective steps, and embed ongoing continuing education so competency keeps pace with change (APA, 2025; HAI, 2025).*

Q: What should counselors expect from the training research team at the conclusion of this research in early 2026?

A: *Counselors can expect a counseling-specific best-practice set and ethical framework with ready-to-use tools such as model syllabus language, informed-consent templates for AI, decision-tree checklists, and a scenario bank for classrooms, supervision, and continuing education (NBCC, 2025; ACA, 2014). Educators and practitioners will also get quick-start micro-modules and "plain-language explainers" designed to reduce uncertainty and build confident, values-aligned practice so AI becomes an adjunct to empathy and not a substitute for it (APA, 2025; NBCC, 2025).*

Lisa Henderson (Counselor Practice Lead):

Q: What are some common misconceptions counselors might have about AI, and how can awareness of ethical considerations help prevent misuse?

A: *Common misconceptions are that AI is too advanced to understand, is too risky to trust, will replace the human connection central to our work, or that its imperfections, such as biased outputs, make it unusable. All of those misconceptions would be true if we were removing the human provider from the equation. Any technology or innovation's job is to enhance what humans do, not replace it or do it less effectively. Raising awareness of ethical considerations helps demystify AI, empowering counselors to critically evaluate tools and use them in ways that enhance, not compromise, the therapeutic relationship.*

Q: How can counselors stay informed about evolving AI tools and ensure their practices align with ethical standards and best practices?

A: *Counselors should engage with trusted professional organizations, attend trainings, and follow emerging research—especially from interdisciplinary sources that include mental health, ethics, and technology. Staying informed isn't about chasing every new tool but about understanding core principles—like transparency, consent, and clinical oversight—that apply to responsible use across any AI system.*

Q: What practical advice would you give to counselors who are hesitant or resistant to integrating AI into their work with clients?

A: *Depending on a counselor's career goals, they might not need to integrate AI into their work with clients. But if they are curious or interested but hesitant, I recommend they start small. Try using AI in non-clinical ways first, like automating notes or organizing resources. As they gain confidence, they'll better understand its limits and potential. Most importantly, always let clinical judgment and ethical values lead the way.*

Q: What do you hope your team will accomplish as they focus on counselor practice within the research?

A: *I hope we develop practical ethical guidance that meets counselors and regulators across the spectrum of AI understanding and comfort. There is a vast range of knowledge of how AI works and what it can and should do to enhance and optimize all aspects of mental health care. I expect having guardrails we trust to keep us and others in bounds of safety and ethics will increase the scope of useful tools on the market and counselors' ability to use them, all for the benefit of the people we serve.*

As AI continues to grow and influence the counseling profession, it is essential that counselors are prepared, not just technically, but ethically and professionally. We recognize that some practitioners may choose not to incorporate AI into their work, and that decision is respected. Our goal is to support all counselors, regardless of where they stand on AI adoption, by providing clear guidance, ethical frameworks, and ongoing education.

The work of PARC exemplifies how collaborative leadership—bringing together top experts from across the country—can help us navigate this complex landscape responsibly. Together, we will ensure that AI enhances counselors' needs in ways that uphold professional integrity, prioritize the well-being of the clients served by counselors, and improve the training of future counselors.