

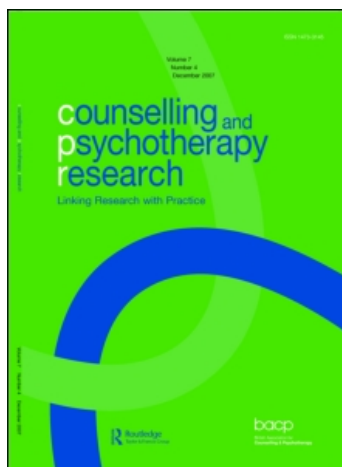
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What do counsellors and psychotherapists need to know about research?

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RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT

What do counsellors and psychotherapists need to know about research?

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Regardless of the model of therapy being taught, counselling and psychotherapy training must address the theory and skills of psychotherapeutic practice and its ethical, cultural, organisational, economic, social, and political context. For their part, trainees are focussed on what happens in the therapy room and look to clinical supervisors and trainers to help them enhance their skills. Trainees often have trouble seeing the importance of developing their capacity to function as reflective practitioners grounded in research, which is necessary for them to function autonomously as professionals. Professional practice requires the wisdom, knowledge, and skill of a master craftsman (Sennett, 2008), able to investigate and process complex material and make appropriate judgements or decisions, to contribute to future developments with new knowledge. Research informs and can improve practice, but is often a hard sell.

Counselling and psychotherapy training in the UK and elsewhere has had an uneasy relationship with the scientist practitioner model more traditionally embraced by clinical and counselling psychology training (Lane & Corrie, 2006). The British Psychological Society (2005) identifies the scientist practitioner model as central to the activity of applied practice in its subject benchmarks for psychology. The 'Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies' (IAPT) campaign (DoH, 2008) has recently seriously challenged the counselling and psychotherapy profession for its reticence to engage in research, as evidenced by the influx of funding for new services offering primarily cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) (Hodson & Browne, 2008). The body of research evidence that supports the efficacy of CBT has resulted in National Institute for Clinical Evidence (NICE) Guidelines that lean heavily toward the treatment of anxiety and depression by CBT, leaving many counsellors and therapists out of the frame for potential employment in the new services.

The government white paper *Trust, Assurance and Safety: The Regulation of Health Professionals in the 21st Century* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2007) makes regulation of the psychological therapies inevitable within the next few years, through the Health Professions Council. Registration criteria will include the need to have completed an approved qualification. All qualifications approved for other registered professions are university degrees. Requiring a basic degree or a master's degree for qualification for counselling or psychotherapy will be a substantial change from the current situation. At present only one-third of all training courses can award university qualifications at degree level (Aldridge, 2006). In short, changes in professional training are now inevitable, with research featuring prominently in the new curriculum.

Crane and McArthur Hafen (2002) suggest that a distinct professional identity should integrate consumption and production of research as essential aspects of good practice. Although this is a long way from where counsellors and therapists currently identify themselves, change now appears to be inevitable. Evidence-based practice is not a passing whim and, without supporting evidence, some therapeutic approaches and even modalities may soon find themselves permanently outside the health care system.

So, what do counsellors and psychotherapists need to know about research? What is research training likely to look like in the new curriculum? Inevitably, the curriculum and assessment requirements will vary according to the qualification offered, but essentially trainees need to become informed consumers of research evidence, to be able to evaluate practice, and to develop their curiosity and reflective capacity through identifying research questions and systematically undertaking a research study (Dunnett, Cooper, & Wheeler, 2007).

Becoming informed consumers of research evidence

The field of counselling and psychotherapy has a long history spanning the 20th century. McLeod (2003) argues that its development is a social construction, owing as much to social demands and pressures as it does to research. Of course, this raises the question of how 'research' is defined. Freud's case studies provided him and others with rich data, closely analysed, from which complex theory was extrapolated; case studies continue to be an important component of training.

Empirical research in psychotherapy dates back to the 1930s and 1940s, with early studies of the effectiveness of psychoanalysis suggesting that about two-thirds of patients improved (McLeod, 2003). This was challenged by Eysenck (1952), who claimed to have shown that waiting list patients recovered at much the same rate as those in treatment, using the phrase 'spontaneous remission' to describe this effect. His study stimulated psychotherapy researchers to increase their activity and to improve their methods in order to regain credibility for the efficacy of psychotherapy. It seems that history is now repeating itself, and the challenge of the IAPT programme will once again have the effect of prompting increased activity in counselling and psychotherapy research. This historical context highlights the social, political, and economic factors impinging on both mental health service delivery and research; an understanding of which all professionals should have.

A key feature of competent professional practice is a thirst for new knowledge and understanding. For example, Skovholt and Jennings (2003), in their investigation of master therapists, found that being a 'voracious reader' was one of nine significant characteristics. Therapists need to know how to find information from the literature (including electronic sources) that might help them with a particular client. They need to know how to access evidence to support their practice in order to present robust arguments to managers and employers if and when challenged. It is not just a matter of being able to quote sources of evidence, but of having an understanding of the nature of that evidence. For example, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, randomized controlled trials, and naturalistic studies all have their place in the science of counselling and psychotherapy. Professional therapists need to know what these methods are, and be able to discuss their merits and limitations.

Evaluation of practice

At the centre of the enterprise of counselling and psychotherapy are three questions. Do clients change substantially over the course of counselling? Is counselling substantially responsible for these changes? What specific aspects of counselling contribute to client change? While these questions drive therapy

process and outcome research, including randomized controlled trials (RCTs), in actual practice these questions are addressed one client at a time, at the single case level. Hence trainees need to learn how to carry out systematic single case studies that can answer these three key questions, using systematic case study methods such as hermeneutic single case efficacy design (Elliot, 2002). Systematic single case designs require quantitative and qualitative data collection methods as well as the application of systematic reasoning strategies for organizing data to produce reasonable answers. Such methods seem less formidable once it becomes apparent that they build on a familiar aspect of psychotherapy training – namely, the intensive case study.

Many counsellors and therapists will work in an agency providing a service to the public at some point in their career. Regardless of the type of agency, there will be a requirement to demonstrate that it delivers a valuable service that meets its service mission. Information will be needed for annual reports, publicity material, funding applications, or even as evidence for promotion. Identifying potential or actual problems can inform a service evaluation, which might include simple group design surveys or outcome monitoring studies, both qualitative and quantitative. A service manager will need to identify evaluation questions and then find methods appropriate for answering those questions. Counsellors and psychotherapists who have learned how to use these methods on their initial counselling or psychotherapy training course will be well-placed to step in to meet this need.

Carrying out a research project

As trainees become more familiar with research and research methods as an integral part of their training, their own research curiosity will be encouraged. Having learned how to access information, how to read research reports critically, how to use basic qualitative and quantitative methods, and how important evaluation is, they will be ready to undertake a small project themselves. A list of key current research topics appropriate to the theoretical orientation of the course could be offered and discussed, to see whether any of them resonate with trainees' inherent curiosity. They will need to be encouraged and supported to find their own answerable questions and the appropriate method of exploring such questions.

Finally, there needs to be an emphasis on 'knowledge products' – on the output from research in the public domain through publication. Trainees should understand how such 'products' are constructed and the process involved in submitting a paper for publication, managing peer reviewer feedback, and resubmitting when necessary. This activity will ensure that *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* continues to receive a steady flow of well-crafted submissions from practitioners inspired both to engage in research and to have it published. The future

of the profession of counselling and psychotherapy hangs on the successful education of the next generation of research-savvy practitioners!

Biographical Notes

Professor Robert Elliott (University of Strathclyde) has recently moved to Scotland after a long and distinguished career as a psychotherapy researcher in the USA and is now making a substantial and welcome contribution to psychotherapy research in the UK. Among his many books and publications is his research methods book 'Research methods for clinical psychology (2nd ed., 2003, with Chris Barker & Nancy Pistrang).

Professor Sue Wheeler (University of Leicester) initiated (with John McLeod) the BACP Counselling Research Conference in 1994 and has made a major contribution to the development of an infrastructure for research within BACP and beyond. Her research interests are focussed on the development of counselling as a profession and recent research activity has included a systematic review of supervision (with Kaye Richards) published by BACP.

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