

Doing Counselling Research



John McLeod

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PREFACE

This book has been written to encourage critical thinking and reflection on the nature and purpose of counselling and psychotherapy. Throughout the book, the words 'counselling', 'psychotherapy' and 'therapy' are used to describe a set of activities and helping processes that are basically the same. This usage arises from a belief that the distinctiveness of 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy' lies in factors such as professional socialisation and organisational setting rather than in any differences in types of client need or therapist strategy.

This book should be of value to those engaged in counselling research, and those engaged in counselling practice who wish to use research to inform that practice. Chapters 1 to 7 introduce some of the methods that have been used in studies of counselling and psychotherapy, while Chapters 8 and 9 examine the ways that these methods have been applied in two key areas of inquiry: therapy process and outcome. Chapter 10 reviews some of the ethical dilemmas raised by research in this field. The final chapter summarises and explores the main methodological themes and issues in counselling research.

The book is written from an interdisciplinary perspective, which views counselling as an applied discipline that meaningfully draws its ideas and techniques from the humanities, theology, philosophy, sociology and anthropology as well as from the more familiar sources in psychology and medicine. Each of these contributor disciplines has much to offer in terms of methodological diversity.

Anyone who has had even the slightest involvement with counselling will know that it is a highly complex undertaking. What may on the surface appear to be a simple conversation between client and counsellor can be understood at many levels and from many perspectives. This book reflects that multi-faceted reality. There is no one right way to do counselling research. There are, instead, a diversity of methods and techniques. In a book of this length it would be impossible to provide enough information to equip the reader immediately to go out and set a piece of research in motion. Instead, the aim is to act as a bridge between counselling and methodology by explaining how different methodologies have been or could be applied to counselling issues, and by supplying enough information for the interested reader to find more detailed technical sources if necessary.

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1

DOING COUNSELLING RESEARCH

This book is written both for counsellors intending to carry out research, and for counsellors who read research in the hope of finding knowledge and understanding that will help them to improve their practice. The growth of counselling over the past 50 years has been accompanied by a steady development of strategies and methods designed to facilitate critical inquiry into the process and outcomes of this type of helping relationship. The aim of this book is to show that, in counselling and psychotherapy, systematic research can make a vital contribution to the quality of service that is offered to clients.

For the purposes of this book, the position will be taken that there is a large degree of overlap between 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy', and many examples of studies of psychotherapy process and outcome will be included. Despite some differences in settings, client groups and professional affiliations, counsellors and psychotherapists are engaged in fundamentally the same kind of work. Although it can be argued that a distinctive research agenda can be identified for counselling (McLeod, 1994a), the greater quantity and influence of psychotherapy research has tended to dominate the field. It is easier to get funding for research with 'psychotherapy' in the title than for studies of counselling. So, although it is probably the case that more counselling than psychotherapy research is actually carried out, in the form of student dissertations, the majority of large-scale studies, and thus the majority of articles published in academic journals, go under the heading of 'psychotherapy'.

Why is research important for counsellors?

There is considerable evidence, mainly from surveys of counsellors and psychotherapists in the USA (Cohen et al., 1986; Morrow-Bradley and Elliott, 1986), that practitioners of psychological therapies do not read research articles, and do not consider research to be particularly relevant to their work. The reasons for this research–practice 'gap' are examined more closely in Chapter 11. However, given the scepticism about the value of research that is expressed in these surveys, it is useful to consider the role of research within counselling as a whole. The following are some of the most salient reasons for carrying out counselling research.

1 *Gaining a wider perspective* Counselling is largely a private activity, conducted in conditions of confidentiality. Research studies allow counsellors to learn about and from the work of other therapists, and give the profession a means of pooling knowledge and experience on an international scale.

2 *Accountability* There is a significant level of resourcing of counselling from public finances, and this financial backing brings with it a responsibility to demonstrate the efficacy of what is being offered to clients. It does not convince the public at large for counsellors to assert that, in their personal experience, most clients gain a great deal from therapy. More rigorous, objective evidence is required. In recent years, stimulated by the work of Masson (1988), there have been a growing number of published accounts of abuse of clients by therapists, which has led to research into the prevalence and causes of this type of misconduct. Other writers have been highly critical about the benefits that clients gain from therapy. If counselling is to maintain its good public image, and continue to attract funding from government agencies, health providers and employers, then effective, research-based systems of accountability are essential.

3 *Developing new ideas and approaches* Counselling and psychotherapy are new, emerging professions, and innovations in theory and technique are springing up all the time. Until the 1930s, the only form of psychotherapy that existed was psychoanalysis. There are now dozens of well-established approaches. Counselling is an activity in which innovations are generated by practitioners and then subsequently evaluated by researchers. This is the reverse of the situation in medicine, where laboratory researchers will create a new drug or piece of technology which is then carefully tested in patient trials. Whereas in medicine there are legal safeguards preventing premature experimentation with patients, in counselling it is inevitable that new techniques and ideas will be in practical use before they are subjected to research scrutiny. Given that there is evidence that therapeutic interventions can do harm as well as good (Lambert, 1989), an informed awareness of the value of research in checking the value of innovations is indispensable.

4 *Applications of counselling in new areas* Running in parallel with the development of new techniques has been the opening up of new client groups and areas for the application of counselling. There has been a significant expansion over the past decade in counselling in organisations, in primary health care and in response to disaster and trauma. The relevance and effectiveness of existing models in these new contexts is an important topic for research.

5 Personal and professional development One of the chief sources of job satisfaction experienced by many counsellors is the sense of continually learning about human nature in response to the lives and personal worlds that clients allow them to enter. As part of this process, practitioners may find themselves with 'burning questions' (Whitaker and Archer, 1989) that can only be answered by doing some research. The professional and career development path taken by experienced counsellors may lead many to seek to consolidate their professional identity by making a contribution to the research literature (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 1992). The motivation to conduct research may therefore arise just as much from the personal needs of practitioners as from external organisational or social demands.

A fundamental theme running through these reasons for undertaking research is that, like other institutions in modern industrial-capitalist societies, counselling is, or strives to be, an 'open system'. The knowledge base of counselling is not fixed, dogmatic and immutable. Instead, criticism and questioning is encouraged, and most (if not all) information about counselling is in the public domain, accessible through libraries. Although some of the theories currently in use may *appear* solid and immovable, reflection on the brief history of therapy will show that pioneers such as Freud and Rogers had to struggle to get their ideas accepted in the face of what was the accepted wisdom of their time and place. And, inevitably, even the apparent certainties of psychodynamic or person-centred theory will in turn be overthrown.

Research is important for counsellors in establishing the legitimacy of the profession. Hasenfeld (1992) has argued that all forms of welfare or human service must be perceived as legitimate by not only their clients but also by regulators, resource-providers and other 'stakeholders'. Like other human service professions such as medicine, nursing, clinical psychology, teaching and social work there is an expectation that members of the counselling profession will be able to offer a rational basis for their interventions through drawing on a research-based body of knowledge. This trend is reflected in the increasing movement toward university- and college-based training for these professions, with significant emphasis in these courses on research awareness and skills. Many of these developments are problematic for counselling, where much of the training has been provided by independent institutes and much of the practice has been provided by lay volunteers.

What is research?

There are many myths and fantasies about research. These often include vivid images of white coats and laboratories. People with practical skills and competencies may believe that research is something that is

'beyond' them. A very prevalent myth in the counselling world is that research is about numbers, impenetrable statistics and large samples and has no place for ordinary human feelings and experiences. It is hard to identify with the role of being a researcher. The researcher is someone who is an expert, who knows. Running through these images and fantasies is a sense of research as another world, a kind of parallel universe that takes what is happening in the real world and processes it through computers.

These myths, perhaps stated here in an exaggerated form, act as a barrier that stops counsellors becoming engaged in research. A more constructive point of view is to start from the acknowledgement that we do 'research' all the time. Each of us has a model or map of the world, and is continually seeking new evidence with which to verify or alter that model. A counselling session with a client can be seen as a piece of research, a piecing together of information and understandings, followed by testing the validity of conclusions and actions based on that shared knowing. Over dozens of clients and hundreds of sessions we build up our own theories of what different types of client are like and what is effective with them. These personal theories almost always have some connection to 'official' theories, but retain an idiosyncratic element originating in the unique experiences of the individual counsellor.

A useful working definition of research is: *a systematic process of critical inquiry leading to valid propositions and conclusions that are communicated to interested others*. Breaking this definition down into its component meanings allows some of the assumptions that lie behind it to be made explicit.

- 1 The concept of *critical inquiry*. Research grows out of the primary human tendency or need to learn, to know, to solve problems. These impulses are fundamentally *critical*; the need to know is the counterpoint to the sense that what is known is not quite right.
- 2 Research as a *process* of inquiry. Any research involves a series of steps or stages. Knowledge must be constructed. There is a cyclical process of observation, reflection and experimentation.
- 3 Research is *systematic*. There are two distinct sets of meanings associated with the notion that research should be systematic. The first is that any investigation takes place within a theoretical system of concepts or constructs. A piece of research is embedded in a framework or way of seeing the world. Secondly, research involves the application of a set of methods or principles, the purpose of which is to achieve knowledge that is as valid and truthful as possible.
- 4 The products of research are *propositions* or statements. There is a distinction between research and learning. Experiential knowing, or 'knowing how', can be a valuable outcome of an inquiry process, but *research* always involves communication with others. Learning can occur at an individual, intuitive level, but research requires the

symbolization and transmission of these understandings in the public domain.

- 5 Research findings are judged according to criteria of *validity*, truthfulness or authenticity. To make a claim that a statement is based on research is to imply that it is in some way more valid or accurate than a statement based on personal opinion. However, every culture has its own distinctive criterion or 'logic of justification' for accepting a theory or statement as valid. For example, within mainstream psychology truth value is equated with statements based on rational, objective experimentation. In psychoanalysis, truth value is judged on the basis of clinical experience.
- 6 Research is *communicated to interested others*, it takes place within a research community. No single research study has much meaning in isolation. Research studies provide the individual pieces that fit together to create the complex mosaic of the *literature* on a topic.

This broad definition of research is intended to demonstrate that there are many ways of arriving at valid propositional knowledge in the field of counselling. The definition does not imply that research must be 'scientific', nor does it make assumptions about what constitutes science. In technologically advanced modern societies, it is all too readily assumed that 'research' equals 'science' and that scientific methods represent the only acceptable means of generating useful knowledge. A great deal of research into counselling and psychotherapy has followed this route, in taking for granted the rules and canons of scientific method and constructing therapy as a sub-branch of applied psychology or as a discipline allied to medicine. However, there are strong arguments in support of the position that counselling is better seen as an *interdisciplinary* activity, using concepts and methods from the arts and humanities, theology, philosophy and sociology as well as psychology and medicine (McLeod, 1993; Thorne and Dryden, 1993). If this perspective is adopted, it is essential that research in counselling is defined in such a way as to give equal weight and legitimacy to methods of inquiry drawn from *all* these disciplines.

Another feature of the definition of research being employed here is that research is not taken to be only studies that appear in academic journals. There exists a broad continuum of research activity. At a very local level, a counsellor may critically review his or her work with a particular set of clients and report back their conclusions to a peer supervision group. Also at a local level, a counselling agency may analyse data on clients and outcomes for inclusion in its Annual Report. By contrast, international collaborative studies may involve 'cutting edge' developments in theory and practice (Beutler and Crago, 1991). Relatively little research ever finds its way into academic journals. The majority of studies are disseminated as limited circulation reports and discussion papers, or are lodged in college libraries as

student dissertations. Nevertheless, across this continuum of sophistication and ambition, all counselling researchers are faced with the same set of methodological and practical issues.

Tensions and dilemmas in counselling research

Although one of the aims of this book is to enable people to carry out research in the field of counselling, it would be misleading to represent counselling research as a straightforward matter of obeying a set of guidelines or following a recipe. There are serious splits and conflicts within the research community, associated with different conceptions of what comprises valid research methods. It is necessary for researchers to be clear about the choices they are making when they design and carry out a piece of research. These choices are influenced by values, philosophical considerations, practical resource constraints and intended audience.

Counselling research is conducted in the context of a massive ongoing philosophical debate about the nature of knowledge. The field of *philosophy of science* has emerged in the post-war era as one of the most important branches of philosophy. Philosophers of science have attempted to analyse and understand the basic nature of scientific inquiry – how do scientists create knowledge that is so powerful that it has transformed the modern world? The most influential philosopher of science has been Sir Karl Popper. In a series of books, Popper (1959, 1962, 1972) argued that science progresses through a process of *conjectures* and *refutations*. Scientists devise theories or conjectures that are then tested through experimental methods in an effort to refute them. Popper asserts that no theory can represent the complete truth, but that the best theory is the one that can stand up to the most rigorous testing. It is in this way that scientists arrive at theories that have immense power and practical value. For Popper, the role of the scientist as a well-equipped, skilful *critic* lay at the heart of the scientific enterprise. From this perspective, academic freedom is important because any restriction on the potential to criticise diminishes the possibility of advancement in knowledge. For Popper, the weakness of systems of thought such as Marxism and psychoanalysis was located in their unwillingness to open themselves to criticism. Popper saw these theories as representing *closed* systems of thought.

The ideas of Popper can usefully be set alongside the work of Kuhn (1962), who observed that, although Popper was right in identifying the crucial role of criticism and refutation in scientific progress, in practice the dominant scientific theories were very rarely ever actually overthrown. Kuhn (1962) suggested that to explain this phenomenon, science needed to be viewed as a social activity. In the early years in the life of a new area of science, there would probably be many competing

theories, as different researchers attempted to grasp a poorly understood domain of knowledge. However, as soon as one clearly adequate theory emerged that the majority of scientists in the field could support, these researchers came together to form a scientific 'community' linked through adherence to a shared 'paradigm'. The concept of paradigm is central to the work of Kuhn, and it is a complex idea. It is possible to identify more than 20 alternative uses of the concept in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the book in which Kuhn (1962) developed the core of his model. A scientific paradigm can be seen as consisting of the whole apparatus or web of knowledge employed by the members of a scientific community: theories, concepts, methods, common educational experiences, readership of key books and journals, participation in conferences and seminars. Kuhn suggested that, most of the time, scientists engage in what he called 'normal' science, which consists of working out a detailed analysis and application of the paradigm. Occasionally, however, it may become apparent that the theory or paradigm is not able to account for important phenomena, and the scientific community is precipitated into a crisis which is resolved through a revolution represented by the adoption of a new and more comprehensive theory.

The ideas of Popper and Kuhn represent a compelling analysis of the nature of scientific inquiry, and their model makes a lot of sense when applied to the history and evolution of sciences such as physics and chemistry. There are, however, major difficulties inherent in fitting counselling and psychotherapy research into this scheme. It is hard to imagine any theory of therapy that has ever, or would ever, be rejected on the basis of research evidence. Also, there are many competing theories of therapy: the field is far from achieving a unified paradigm. Some commentators have proposed that psychology as a whole, and therapy as a part of that whole, are at a pre-paradigmatic stage. So, although the philosophy of science developed by Kuhn, Popper and others might describe an ideal set of principles through which counselling and psychotherapy might make significant headway in creating more robust and satisfactory theories and techniques, it could be that the field is not yet sufficiently mature to enter this land of promise.

In opposition to these views, other voices have argued that any attempt by the social and human sciences to mimic the methods of the physical sciences is misguided and doomed to failure. From this perspective, it makes little sense to conceptualise people and social groups as objects that can be experimentally manipulated in the same way as physical entities such as rocks or metals might be. The very aims of traditional science, centring on the prediction and control of events, are seen as philosophically and politically inappropriate when applied to the study of human action, which can be regarded as intentional and reflexive. The search in the natural sciences for universal 'laws of nature'

are similarly regarded as mistakenly applied to elucidating culturally embedded ways of knowing in which there are many local truths but perhaps no universal truth.

The eighteenth-century French sociologist Auguste Comte was the originator of the idea of a 'positive' science, in which all phenomena from physics at one extreme to human behaviour at the other could be explained by a single set of natural laws. The philosophy of science created by Comte has been a significant force in shaping much of behavioural psychology. Von Wright characterises the three main tenets of positivism as being, first, that 'the exact natural sciences, in particular mathematical physics, set a methodological ideal or standard which measures the degree of development or perfection of all the other sciences, including the humanities' (1971: 2). Positivism also assumes a unity of scientific methods. In other words, the same methods are applicable in all fields of knowledge. Finally, positivist thinkers are only satisfied by explanations that are framed in terms of strict 'cause-and-effect' sequences, and reject any explanatory models that employ any notion of 'purpose'.

The focus for much of the opposition to the dominant *positivist* approach to research on people has rested with the proponents of a number of interpretive or *hermeneutic* ways of carrying out research (Taylor, 1979). The key figure in this tradition was Wilhelm Dilthey, who proposed that the study of persons could only be properly carried out through a distinctive *human science*. The method of hermeneutic inquiry has its origins in the efforts of biblical scholars to interpret the meaning of incomplete fragments of Scripture. This approach supplies the basis for a number of research strategies that rely on qualitative and interpretive methods. These strategies draw in general on the kinds of research activity carried out in disciplines such as the arts, humanities and theology, in that the task of the researcher is ultimately to place a 'text' (e.g. a transcript of a therapy session) in some kind of interpretive framework of meaning. The nature and scope of qualitative approaches are explored in more detail in Chapter 6. Some adherents of this type of research have described it as a 'new paradigm' (Reason and Rowan, 1981), to make explicit the contrast with previous methods that relied on natural science techniques and assumptions. Gergen (1985) uses the term *constructionist* to refer to the way that the researcher socially constructs a reading or interpretation of the material.

The tension or polarisation that is being described here can be seen as fundamental to all fields of human inquiry. One of the few scholars successfully to have straddled both sides of this gulf has been Jerome Bruner, who argues that:

there are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another. (1986: 11)

Bruner calls these two ways of knowing the *paradigmatic* and *narrative* modes. He characterises the paradigmatic mode as logico-scientific, which 'attempts to fulfil the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation'. The narrative mode, by contrast, deals in 'intention and action' and works with 'good stories, gripping drama, believable (though not necessarily "true") historical accounts' (1986: 12–13). In reflecting on the role and methodologies of the human sciences, he observes that, 'in contrast to our vast knowledge of how science and logical reasoning proceed, we know precious little in any formal sense about how to make good stories' (1986: 14).

The differences between these two ways of knowing raises many fundamental questions within counselling and therapy research. Some of the specific issues that are encountered by researchers are:

- 1 Can useful knowledge be best achieved by accurate, objective measurement of variables or by respecting the complexity of everyday language?
- 2 Is the aim of research the prediction of outcomes (e.g. a person with a particular diagnosis will be helped by a certain type of intervention) or the development of insight and understanding?
- 3 What kind of research is most relevant for practice?
- 4 What is the role of theory in research?
- 5 To what extent should the researcher aim to be detached and objective as against being an involved participant in the lives of research participants?
- 6 By what criteria are the validity of research findings to be judged?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, which reflect competing value systems, 'images of the person', ideologies and intellectual traditions. The ways that different counselling researchers have attempted to address these issues will be illustrated throughout this book. Some tentative pointers to new directions are offered in Chapter 11.

Conclusions

Doing counselling research occupies a position in the service of practice. It is hard to envisage what 'pure' research into therapy might look like. Counselling and psychotherapy are applied, interdisciplinary activities that draw on a rich array of primary disciplines, each of which represents a valuable source of concepts and methods of inquiry. The diversity and complexity of these traditions, and the fragmented nature of therapy as an enterprise, means that counselling researchers are called on to reflect deeply on the methodological and philosophical choices that guide their work. Readers of counselling research, similarly, need to bear in mind that different studies may be expressed in quite different languages and voices.

There are perhaps several threads running through this initial discussion of the nature of counselling research. First, the driving force of research is the area between knowing and not knowing. Something is known but it is not enough. Research that has meaning takes off from that point, which ultimately comprises a personal felt sense of a need to know. Secondly, research is a component of all competent counselling practice. It is not possible to be a good counsellor without possessing a spirit of open-ness to inquiry. Good research in the domain of counselling and psychotherapy always exists in a live dialectic relationship with practice. Finally, research is a collective activity. Each study draws on what has gone before, and its inevitable imperfections and inconclusiveness will be carried forward by someone yet to come. In the next chapter this final point, which relates to the importance of understanding the research literature, is explored in more detail.

2

READING THE LITERATURE: PLACING RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

Research can be seen as a complex form of collective learning. It is through research of one kind or another that the community of members of any discipline develop their shared capacity to act in response to problems. It is important to recognise that any piece of research always exists in relation to other investigative studies. No matter how original a new research question or technique might appear to be, it can only be asked or constructed on the back of all the questions or techniques that have gone before it. One of the essential tasks in any research project is, consequently, to become familiar with other relevant work in the particular area of interest. In other words, it is necessary, at some point, to read and review the literature, to map a context within which the study can be located.

What is the literature?

The 'literature' on counselling comprises the written materials, and also some published video and audio tapes, that represent in their totality the body of formal knowledge on the subject of counselling. This body of knowledge can be contrasted with the tacit, experiential or practical knowledge that is transmitted through an oral tradition. When people are trained as counsellors some of their knowledge comes through books and research articles, but most of what they learn is acquired through observation, reflection, personal experience and active experimentation. It is obvious that both types of knowledge, formal and tacit, are equally important in the field of counselling. No one would suppose that it is possible to learn the skills of counselling solely through books. Equally, it is hard to imagine a practitioner being able to gain an adequate ability to conceptualise or understand clients and the counselling process through first-hand experience alone.

The literature on counselling includes writings on theoretical, ethical and professional issues as well as research. The research literature therefore represents a sub-set of the counselling literature as a whole.

This research literature is *structured* into various specialisms. For example, there exist specialist journals on areas such as group counselling, supervision and student counselling. The literature is not only structured but is also *dynamic*. It can usefully be viewed as a field of discourse, in which debates and themes ebb and flow over the years. The literature is *boundaried*. There are areas of overlap between the counselling literature and the bodies of knowledge generally considered as, say, 'medicine' or 'anthropology', and some important material may be found in unexpected places in these other domains. Finally, the research literature is *regulated* and censored in accordance with the prevailing norms and consensus regarding what is 'publishable'. To become a paper in an academic or professional journal, a piece of writing must be acceptable to editors and referees, who act as gatekeepers to the literature. In parallel to the official literature that is stored in the periodicals stacks of university libraries, there is an underground literature of unpublished papers and dissertations and limited-circulation reports and discussion documents. These more ephemeral items may be less polished, but can none the less possess considerable interest and information value.

The historical development of counselling research

A sense of the historical development of research in counselling and psychotherapy can be valuable as a means of finding signposts to potentially relevant areas of the literature. One of the striking aspects of the literature taken as a whole is that issues that may appear to be currently fashionable or at the cutting edge of research have also been 'hot' issues at some point in the past. The recent interest in the experience of the client (e.g. Rennie, 1990) has its parallel in client-centred research carried out in the 1940s (e.g. Lipkin, 1948). Similarly, current research into 'non-specific' or general characteristics found in all forms of successful therapy (Grencavage and Norcross, 1990) can be traced back to Fiedler (1950) and Watson (1940). The explosion of studies of outcome and effectiveness that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s had its precursor in the 1940s (see Eysenck, 1952). Contemporary attention to the problems of intensive case-study methodology (Hilliard, 1993; Jones, 1993) represents a fascinating recapitulation of the dilemmas and challenges confronted by Henry Murray and his colleagues in the 1920s and 1930s (Murray, 1938). Inspection of the research literature reveals cycles of interest and attention to certain topics and questions. It can often be illuminating, therefore, to look in the literature beyond the mass of recent references that are the standard output of most on-line databases.