Editorial: What is research?

Terry Hanley

*If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?*  
(Albert Einstein).

At the outset of this Editorial I wish to welcome you to a new look *Counselling Psychology Review*. As has been indicated in subsequent editorials the publication is going through numerous changes. This edition represents the first instance in which the new format is being adopted. I hope you enjoy it. In fact I hope you enjoy it so much that you consider contributing to it – a point that I return to later in this Editorial.

This introduction concentrates on the issue of research, and to pull you in I refer to the often cited quote from Albert Einstein presented at the start of this piece (my apologies that I am unable to locate the actual source of the quote). To me this highlights much of what I like about both research and therapy. It places emphasis on the process of discovery and evokes a sense of integrity in the process that is unfortunately not always evident in such work (I’d recommend Ben Goldacre’s *Bad Science* as an easy-to-read introduction to the darker side of research [Goldacre, 2008]).

The emphasis on research evident in this edition represents, at least in part, the Division Committee’s commitment to supporting the growth of our profession in this area. It also marks the creation of the online Forum which acts as a dynamic space for counselling psychologists to discuss, debate and share ideas and resources – if you have not been online yet to check this out then I would heartedly recommend you paying the website a visit (www.bps.org.uk/dcop). In the meantime let’s begin this research publication with an easy question to answer: What is research?

By now, I would anticipate that you have cottoned on to my thinking that there is not a simple answer to this question. If we take the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE – a process used to identify and rate the quality of higher education research departments in the UK) definition as a starting point, it used the following definition.

‘Research’ for the purpose of the RAE is to be understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding’ (RAE, 2005, p.34).

This definition continued to describe some inclusion and exclusion criteria, but for the purpose here this is not necessary to regurgitate. In reading the definition the breadth of the topic is clearly vast. Where can such an endeavour truly begin and end? For instance, ask yourself ‘Do you see therapy as an investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding?’ I’m sure that many of you could see fit to define it in this way. I certainly feel there is an investigative nature to the work as a therapist that I undertake and have no problem in framing practice as a research activity. Likewise, from the other angle, I am sure that many pieces of research have a therapeutic edge. During the many hours of research supervision I have offered, I have seen students explore a wide variety of topics and tackle some incredibly sensitive subject matters. This has often included the exploration of very personal research topics and almost always covered the fear of not being academic enough to complete such a study to an appropriate standard.

So, where do we draw the line between practice and research? I am reminded of the more operational definition of research provided by John McLeod. Research can be viewed as comprising the following common components.
1. Critical Inquiry – it is a human tendency or need to learn, to know or solve problems.
2. Process of Inquiry – it involves a series of steps or stages.
3. It is Systematic.
4. It produces propositions or statements.
5. The findings are judged according to validity, truthfulness or authenticity.
6. It is communicated to interested others.
(Summarised from McLeod, 2003, p.4)

I am also reminded of common definitions of therapeutic activities. Let’s rely upon John McLeod again for a definition of counselling:

‘Counselling is a purposeful, private conversation arising from the intention of one person to reflect on and resolve a problem in living and the willingness of another person to assist in that endeavour.’ (McLeod, 2009, p.6)

In these instances differences begin to become apparent. However, they are not necessarily differences in the way in which the work is brought to life. Most of the components of research offered by McLeod could fit relatively easily into a therapeutic frame. Instead I would argue that the differences really lie in the motivations behind the activities themselves and thus the contracts that we develop with our co-researchers/participants/subjects (choose your term of choice) or people/clients/patients (once again choose your term of choice).

I must now confess to confusing myself a little. Initially, when I began drafting this Editorial I felt I would be arguing that practice can be research and vice versa. I have now convinced myself that this cannot be the case (or at least adopt this stance as a means of provocation for the time being). Thus, for the activity being undertaken to retain appropriate boundaries, each has to remain distinct. This clarity comes even more to the fore when considering being appropriately insured for the activity being undertaken, an issue that appears to be gaining momentum within both therapy and research communities (‘…honestly your Honour I was just researching the client… I mean participant… once a week at £x per hour). Of course, this is not to say that (1) therapy cannot be research informed (see the likes of Cooper (2009), for more discussion in this area), (2) that research cannot be embedded into practice, or (3) that therapy cannot follow processes akin to research. Furthermore, researchers can clearly utilise counselling skills to enrich the data that they collect, however, I would argue that despite these overlaps and possible similar outcomes, it does seem important that each activity remains clear in its focus.

Considering the view above further, I return to the defining components of research as indicated John McLeod. The point I wish to return to in particular is:

6. Research is ‘communicated to interested others’.

This statement reflects one of the major differences between research and practice. It is not often that we explicitly undertake such a process within our work as therapists (although I do concede that clinical supervision could be one forum which fits such a definition). For those regularly involved in research activities, this is, however, naturally part of the process. I would even go as far as to say that researchers actively have a duty to those who have supported their work to disseminate it (‘Why did I spend all that time telling you my story about therapy if you are not going to use it for anything more than get a qualification!’). With that in mind, it would seem an opportune moment to remind those contemplating publishing their work that we have a significant community of ‘interested others’ here in the UK. Specifically, in 2009 we had 2792 of them within the Division of Counselling Psychology (BPS, 2010) and this number continues to grow. Outside of the Division there are also an increasing number of individuals interested in developments within the UK – I get regular requests from international colleagues for papers published in Counselling Psychology Review. As a side issue, this does remind me of the recent proposal
I created to develop a British Journal of Counselling Psychology. Let me assure you that there is movement in this area, but an update will have to wait for another day. In the meantime let me tug a little harder at your moral heart strings and take the opportunity to briefly inform you of the types of papers I hope to attract to this publication. These are as follows:

- papers reporting original empirical investigations (qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods);
- case studies, provided these are presented within a research frame;
- theoretical papers, provided that these provide original insights that are rigorously based in the empirical and/or theoretical literature;
- systematic review articles;
- methodological papers.

Thus, Counselling Psychology Review has an incredibly broad view of what research is and if you have a research project to write-up, a student assignment that you can tweak to the format of the publication, or you wish to present some methodological musing I would love to hear from you. For more inspiration and information do read on. The papers which follow provide a much more concrete (and possibly coherent) rationale for publishing your work.

Overview of the content of this edition

Within this edition we showcase some of the excellent work being undertaken by counselling psychologists within the UK. In particular we start with two prize-winning articles. The first reflects the Division of Counselling Psychology’s Excellence in Research prize winner 2010. This paper was written by Dr Anna Spivack and was supported in its development by Professor Carla Willig. It summarises a project which focussed upon the experience of a split sense of self among inpatients with eating disorders. It reflects in depth on the experiences of the individuals involved in the study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and highlights some pertinent and difficult struggles that are faced. The second paper presents a foray into the theoretical. This paper was successful in winning the Division of Counselling Psychology’s Student Essay Prize in 2010. Lewis Blair is a trainee on the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at the Glasgow Caledonian and Strathclyde Universities. The paper reflects an informed discussion of the scientist-practitioner debate that continually rages within our profession. Needless to say the subject matter fits right in here.

Following on from these two papers we return to business as usual. In the first selection of papers we have two original research papers. The first, by Christine Bonsmann presents a paper looking at what clients say about therapy. This utilises a narrative research approach to creatively reflect upon clients’ experiences. In doing so it provides fascinating insights into both positive and negative therapeutic processes. The second, by Dr Catriona Davis-McCabe and Allan Winthrop, takes a more technological leap. In this paper the authors provide an overview of utilising a computerised cognitive behavioural package within a higher education setting. As someone who has a particular interest in the development of mediated therapy (see, for instance, the Special Edition of Counselling Psychology Review that I had the pleasure of guest editing with Derek Richards in 2009 [Hanley & Richards, 2009]) this whets my appetite. Just as Spivack and Willig describe in the first paper in this publication, the authors utilise IPA to make sense of the data (maybe someone could volunteer to write a paper on why IPA has become a favourite methodological choice for counselling psychologists recently?). The findings generally reflect clients’ positive experiences of utilising such a means of support and add to the slowly developing body of evidence for mediated approaches to therapy.

In the second selection of papers we once again return to the realms of the theoretical. Specifically we begin by introducing a fascinating paper reflecting upon the identity
salience model by Lynn Allen. Lynn is presently in her final year studies at the University of Wolverhampton and I must confess to have never coming across the model prior to reading the paper. With that in mind, I will not attempt to discuss it here and let Lynn’s work speak for itself. The final paper then provides a more methodological exploration. Dr Alison McGourty, Dr Jacqui Farrants, Dr Rebecca Pratt and Marija Cankovic reflect upon the potential impact that research may have on those undertaking it. This is a more reflective piece about the process of research and outlines the potential role that counselling psychologists may have in sensitising research communities to issues of self-care.

Finally, as supplements to this edition, I have included documents reflecting the review process that all papers will go through prior to being published in *Counselling Psychology Review*. This hopes to provide a transparent account of what potential authors will encounter when submitting a paper. That then brings us to the end of this edition of the publication. At this stage I begin to understand how many hours it takes to pull a single edition of this publication together – PHEW (and do drop me a line if you feel you may like to help out). I am particularly glad to see papers which represent many of the training programmes in the UK sitting alongside contributions from those much more embedded in practice. With that in mind, I hope that you agree that the contents reflect some of the excellent work being undertaken within our profession and provide you with much food for thought. Do, however, please keep the contributions coming.

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**References**