Editorial

Research methods in Counselling Psychology: What would Wilhelm Wundt think?

Elena Gil-Rodriguez & Terry Hanley

‘Many psychologists... thought by turning their attention to their own consciousness to be able to explain what happened when we were thinking. Or they sought to attain the same end by asking another person a question, by means of which certain processes of thought would be excited, and then by questioning the person about the introspection he had made. It is obvious... that nothing can be discovered in such experiments.’ (Wundt, 1912, p.149)

WILHELM WUNDT, often cited as one of the founders of modern psychology and the father of experimental psychology (e.g. Wikipedia, 2011) most probably would not have liked this Special Edition of Counselling Psychology Review. This might sound a little presumptuous but we present some of the thinking related to this below. Additionally, we are also being a little presumptuous in assuming that many of you are opening this Special Edition up with at least some trepidation. After all, do you really want to spend a full soak in the bath reading about research methods and methodologies? However, before you decide to put it to one side, do hear our plea to stay with us a little longer, because we feel you will not just find this Special Edition useful and interesting, you will also find that it probes the depths of what it means to be a counselling psychologist. For instance, although there are sections of the discipline of psychology who would stick with Wundt’s more conservative view of the psychological research, from our perspective we have come a long way and counselling psychologists have played (and are playing) a significant part in developing research methods that prove both innovative and help to capture some of the richness of human experience. This Special Edition, therefore, provides a glimpse into the world of research that counselling psychologists inhabit. In doing so, those who come with us on the journey will be treated to contributions from some of the national and international leaders in counselling psychology research.

So, if we begin at the beginning and consider the evolution of therapy itself, let us not forget that the discipline of counselling has its roots firmly embedded in the development of research methods. For instance, Sigmund Freud proved a pioneer in presenting case studies as a means to disseminating his ideas (see, for example, his classic reports of Anna O. Dora, Little Hans, Rat man and Wolf man). Likewise, Carl Rogers was a major proponent of the qualitative research movement as a means to complementing more commonplace quantitative approaches (e.g. Rogers, 1985). The legacy of both of these eminent individuals can be seen clearly within this special edition, with case study and qualitative research playing a major part in the papers which follow. More recently, discussions regarding concepts such as the scientist-practitioner (e.g. Blair, 2011; Lane & Corrie, 2006) have been embraced by the applied psychology disciplines. The sentiment that applied psychologists should actively bridge the practice-research divide has now become an accepted standard of proficiency of the profession (‘Registrant practitioner psychologists must... be able to use professional and research skills in work with clients based on a scientist-practitioner and reflective-practi-
tioner model that incorporates a cycle of assessment, formulation, intervention and evaluation’ (HPC, 2010, pp.17–18)). The development of such a skills base proves no mean feat and encouraging therapists to engage with research has proven a major challenge for other professional bodies (e.g. Mick Cooper’s ‘Essential Research Findings in Counselling and Psychotherapy’ text (2008) was commissioned by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy to encourage such engagement). However, although we playfully suggest that this Special Edition might not be everyone’s cup of tea at the outset of this Editorial, as engagement with research proves a central tenet to the discipline of counselling psychology, we hope the contents of this Special Edition prove relevant to all.

Before moving on to consider the contents of this Special Edition, it is worth reflecting upon what is not included. It is notable that, from the open call for papers for this publication, a majority of the papers have a focus which challenge the dominant paradigm used for commissioning services (i.e. quantitative research that is perceived as objective – potentially the avenue that Wilhelm Wundt might be advocating if he were still alive). Such sentiments are possibly not surprising given the value that counselling psychologists place upon phenomenological perspectives of human experience (e.g. Woolfe, 1990). Politically, however, such a stance may place counselling psychology practice on the back foot. As is evident, the historical tradition of conducting randomised control trials (RCTs) provides therapeutic approaches with a powerful political tool (see Cooper (2011) for a discussion of the use of the RCT in therapeutic research). Reflection upon such an influential approach would, therefore, have been desirable from a counselling psychologist. For instance, the reflexive nature of counselling psychologists might actually help to humanise what can often be perceived as a blunt tool that is incommensurate with many therapeutic practices (e.g. Friere, 2006).

In further contemplating what it is that makes counselling psychology research unique, it is difficult not to consider the judgement that the profession in Britain does not warrant a ‘Journal’ of its own backed by the British Psychological Society (BPS) (see discussions in Hanley, 2010, 2011). In a proactive move to investigate whether the BPS Journals are meeting the needs of counselling psychologists the Division is now planning on commissioning a number of small pieces of research examining where counselling psychology researchers publish (see the Division of Counselling Psychology’s website for more information: www.bps.org.uk/dcop). We hope that this begins to unveil what the trends for publishing counselling psychology research really are. For now, however, we ask you to watch this space and enjoy the contributions that follow.

Overview of this Special Edition
The contributors to this Special Edition of Counselling Psychology Review have taken a far reaching approach to this particular topic area that we hope readers will find stimulating and thought-provoking. The papers are briefly introduced below.

Corrie and Lane introduce us to the idea of complexity theory and how this might be adapted to suit counselling psychology as a framework for negotiating the high degree of complexity, uncertainty and turbulence we are likely to encounter in our practice given the current climate. The authors highlight the increasing demands upon practitioners as we encounter situations which the available ‘evidence’ or experience of past practice may not be able to address. They pose the important question of how we might develop our capability to respond with evidence that will be sustainable and have longevity in such difficult times. Using practice-based examples, Corrie and Lane go on to present a coherent and sophisticated argument illuminating how complexity theory might be drawn upon in the consideration of which type of method-
ology may be the optimum for which type of enquiry. They argue that complexity theory might also be useful in providing direction in the evolution of appropriate research methods that will be able to answer the questions of the future. The paper makes suggestions for creative ways to think about our choice of methods of investigation that is very thought-provoking and, we hope, will open up a useful debate in terms of re-conceptualising how we generate knowledge in counselling psychology. The arguments posed by Corrie and Lane are certainly highly relevant, and perhaps even more so in these difficult and turbulent economic times. The paper engages a wide range of debates (e.g. evidence-based practice, politi-cisation of research, current service initiatives such as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) and offers an interesting perspective on the challenges arising from complexity in the current climate and what it means to be striving for ‘best practice’ within this context.

Kasket and Gil-Rodriguez present a paper with an entirely different flavour as they home in on the apparent identity crisis that they argue can currently be seen in trainee counselling psychologist research. Both are teacher-practitioners and, drawing on their recent experience of supervising and examining doctoral research, have developed a framework of common ‘traps’ into which trainees, and supervisors, might fall when attempting to produce D-level research that clearly articulates and demonstrates its relevance to counselling psychology. The aim of this piece is to present a clear review of the criteria for doctoral level research as found in the Quality Assurance Agency framework of 2008, a discussion around the issue of ‘identity’ in counselling psychology research, and a clear articulation of six common themes or ‘traps’ that tend to present potential problems in trainee research. In addition, the authors speculate as to the likely reason for why such issues might arise and how each might be addressed. The overall target audi-

ence for this pragmatic and practical paper extends beyond the level of the trainee and this article should also be of interest to any supervisor or examiner of doctoral level research, or any research active practitioner.

Action Research (AR) is an egalitarian methodology which is relatively rarely found amongst counselling psychology research. It has an intuitive appeal, however, as it does seem to offer a way to marry research with the practice of counselling psychology and the approach clearly enshrines many of our underpinning values. The next paper will be of great appeal to those practitioners and trainees who are interested in what we could argue to be truly relational research (Finlay & Evans, 2009). Demarco and Willig present a fascinating insight into the experience of conducting AR in Malta. Their reflexive account highlights the many ways in which AR is commensurate with counselling psychology principles and sensitively illus-

trates how Demarco drew upon her experience, skills and therapeutic understandings to facilitate the initiation of a ‘psychological wellbeing’ group for physiotherapists experiencing psychological distress. An insightful reflection on the group processes that emerged as the project developed, the on-going ethical issues that are inherent in a project of this type, and the limitations of conducting such an involved and sustained piece of research are all thoughtfully consid-

ered. This will surely be of great relevance to those who are considering research of this nature, and will certainly be of value to others who are perhaps preparing to enter into this territory.

Following on in a natural progression, the next article by William West presents an interesting take on the use of the tacit dimension in conducting and writing up qualitative counselling psychology research. West reflects on the possible use of the tacit dimension within research planning, data gathering and research report writing. As with Demarco and Willig, the author links this notion to the underpinning principles and therapeutic skills of counselling psychol-
ogists in a thought-provoking discussion of felt-sense and countertransference processes. The different research stages outlined above are considered in detail in turn and this interesting argument will no doubt stimulate reflection and debate amongst any research active counselling psychologists, and trainees, who have a preference for the qualitative paradigm.

McLeod and Cooper then take us into the realms of systematic case studies. Case studies have historically played a significant role in the development of therapeutic theory. They have, however, often been rather ad hoc in their form and this paper provides a protocol for systematic case study research for pluralistic therapeutic approaches. This protocol is harnessed around four key features: (1) the ethical engagement with issues of informed consent and confidentiality; (2) the development of a mixed methods rich case record; (3) the use of team based analysis; and (4) a user friendly presentation of the findings. This work bridges the subject matter of the authors’ recent texts focusing upon Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy (Cooper & McLeod, 2011) and Case Study Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy (McLeod, 2010). Furthermore, it has the potential to influence the way that established practitioners and trainees (and their associated training establishments) explore the nuances of their practice.

The next paper branches out into an entirely different area that is a clear reflection of the digital age in which we live as Terry Hanley demonstrates how this might be harnessed to our advantage in counselling psychology research. Terry’s paper presents a comprehensive illustration of the challenges faced by researchers who wish to use virtual methods for gathering qualitative data, including those of both a practical and ethical nature. Using clear examples from research projects, the article lays bare a number of online and text-based data collection methods, including the use of questionnaires, focus groups, interviews and journals or blogging. Hanley’s experience in using such virtual methods lends itself well to a pragmatic and reflexive account of key issues that might arise. Each method is considered in turn and clearly linked to the literature, while the rationale and justification for using online methods of data collection in counselling psychology research in this day and age is discussed. This article represents a pragmatic and highly utilitarian take on alternative data generation methods that responds well to the current digital climate and is a must for any modern counselling psychology researcher.

Another highly topical area in the current climate of evidence-based practice and accountability, is how clients themselves experience research into their experience of therapy. The paper by Stone and Elliott considers the question of the impact of such research with the overall aim of enhancing our understanding of the effects that the research process may have on the individual themselves and on their progress in therapy. With explicit reference to the psychotherapy and counselling research clinic setting, the authors pose the very pertinent question of how clients’ participation may affect them, and how we might gauge the nature and extent of these effects. They present a grounded theory analysis of previously collected archival data looking at clients’ general experience of the research process and which aspects they found helpful and/or hindering. The authors go on to present a thoughtful discussion of this that highlights the issues inherent in any such research endeavour and is highly relevant to practitioners who may be carrying out practice-based research in terms of how clients report their experience of this situation.

We hope that you will find this a stimulating, thought-provoking, and pertinent collection of articles that will stimulate both debate and a desire to get researching! There is no doubt that a dialogue with the articles and issues presented in this Special Edition may inform and inspire counselling psychology research in the wider world.
In order to support this aspiration even further, within the dialogues and debates section of this publication, you will also find a highly relevant and useful book review. Here Sophia Kariotaki reflects thoughtfully upon First Steps in Practitioner Research: A guide to understanding and doing research in counselling and health and social care by Pete Sanders and Paul Wilkins. We hope you will enjoy this selection of papers as much as we have and wish you all the best in your research endeavours.

A final point
In the last edition of Counselling Psychology Review a copy of a letter relating to the employment of counselling psychologists was published. This has now been superseded by an updated letter (Kinderman, van Scoyoc, Vassalos & Roycroft, 2011) which once again is copied following this Editorial.

About the Editors
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References
Dear Colleagues

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Advertising of Psychology Posts

In September 2010 a guidance letter on the advertising of NHS posts was issued by the British Psychological Society Standing Committee for Psychologists in Health and Social Care (SCPHSC), signed by Peter Kinderman, Chair of SCPHSC and Antony Vassalos, Chair OAC Unite, the union. Since this time further cross-Divisional discussions have taken place regarding the recognition of competences of all Applied Psychologists. Psychologist managers and leaders are advised that recognition must be given to the fact that Applied Psychologists’ training has been evolving and thus the understanding of current competences associated with adjectival titles also needs updating. Psychologist managers and leaders are specifically advised that advertisements for psychology posts should seek applications from Applied Psychologists who meet the required competences for the post. Where specific essential competences, usually associated with an adjectival title such as clinical, counselling, health, forensic or educational, are needed this must be clearly specified. This specific requirement must be justified and consider issues of equal opportunity and employment laws. Consideration must be given to whether an applicant, through CPD and post-qualification experience may have acquired these competences, despite adjectival title, and so be eligible for the post. If you require further information please contact ppbchair@bps.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Kinderman, for the Standing Committee of Psychologists in Health & Social Care and for the Division of Clinical Psychology.

Susan van Scoyoc, for the Division of Counselling Psychology.

Antony Vassalos, for Unite’s Applied Psychologists’ Occupational Advisory Committee.

Patrick Roycroft, for Leadership & Management Faculty.