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## **Tips to make research teaching and learning enjoyable and productive for Counsellors, Psychotherapists and their tutors.**

**Key Words:** Research teaching, research learning, research best practice, research supervision.

### **ABSTRACT**

This article identifies the learning expectations and experiences of qualified Counsellors and Psychotherapists undertaking higher education awards with specific regard to research activity. Drawing on current literature, some early findings from focus group research with students, combined with our personal and professional experiences, we identify what contributes to a productive research experience. This is used as a basis to provide tips for both teachers and those new to research to make counselling and psychotherapy research enjoyable and productive. A full research paper is in preparation.

### **Introduction**

Professional body guidance for practising therapists from counselling and psychotherapy professional bodies articulates the need for and relevance of research to drive effective practice. For example, in the UK the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions (2018) values research for “enhancing our professional knowledge and providing an evidence-base for practice in ways that benefit our clients” and encourages engagement by providing annual research awards. In addition, the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (undated) states that ‘research is central to the future of the Psychotherapy profession’. Furthermore, the British Psychoanalytic Council (2019) states that “*We aim to build strong links between research, clinical practice and public policy*”. Similarly, the British Psychological Society in their practice guidelines (2017, pg. 11) stated that ‘*Research provides the evidence base for the practice of psychology*’.

However, despite these assertions, it is difficult to ascertain the quantity of practitioners engaging with or conducting research projects in their places of work. Moreover, it is also difficult to identify the extent to which therapists can practically access contemporary research intelligence – as much of it is tied up in subscription-based journals or in so called ‘ivory tower’ Universities. In fact, other authors have argued that psychological research conducted in clinical practice post-qualification is not commonplace (Mitchell & Gill, 2014; Smith, & Thew, 2017). Smith, and Thew, (2017) gave evidence from the field of psychology in which research output is a requirement of doctoral training and stated that the modal number of publications for clinical psychologists, namely zero, has not improved in over twenty years.

Nonetheless, literature we have reviewed outlines how a range of experiences in engaging in research activity post studying for an award contributes to some of this paucity. For example, McHugh and Byrne, (2011) showed how a lack of perceived skills, coupled with organisational and clinical systemic cultures that did not value

research, contributed to low research engagement. Additionally, Smith & Thew, (2017) gave a summary of their findings by stating that qualified practitioners have the difficult task of fitting research into limited time, with limited funds, and often without the support of others.

Given these findings we felt that it was important to examine students' experiences of research, even though we knew that the aims of all our research modules recognise that it is important that the students' research experience is satisfactory. In this case 'satisfactory' referring to research learning that facilitates individual growth and learning about accessing, undertaking, analysing or applying research to one's own professional domain.

## **Background literature**

Background literature provided some understanding of the experiences of students engaging with research.

There is some research which orientates education providers towards meeting and addressing student needs. In exploring the research environment for psychology students Gelso, stated "*The fact that students are at the middle or neutral point of interest (in research) belies a sense of ambivalence. Students think they would like to do research but do not have enough experience to know and their interest is tempered by the anxiety they feel about their research potential*" (Gelso, 2006, pg. 3)

Relating specifically to counselling practice, McLeod (2016) found studies that indicated therapists' adoption of research informed practice is a binary position - therapists are committed to using research to enhance practice or therapists view research as lacking relevance. The latter point being a curiosity and a concern for the profession, and we can all speculate as to why that is so.

Environments where research training and familiarisation takes place such as Universities impact on student's/trainee's future career engagement with research in different ways. Firstly, the pedagogical approach needs to be critical and facilitate self-enquiry, thus laying the foundations for therapists to perhaps adopt the former of McLeod's binary position. Secondly, tutors need to be active researchers themselves in order to create supervision relationship built on know-how, serve as a role model and enable shared dissemination (Gelso et al, 2013).

Cooper and Graham (2009) argued that the thought of developing a research project may feel demanding or even daunting and this may be one of the main reasons research ideas do not come to fruition.

Further analysis of literature we reviewed provided some understanding of the experiences of student experiences of research supervision and tuition. Veuger et al (2018) determined that the student-supervisor relationship strongly influences student experience, satisfaction and success, with 75% of students strongly agreeing that a good student/supervisor partnership positively affects the success of the final project but only 40% saying they had managed to build a partnership with their supervisor.

With regard to postgraduate experiences, Ali, Watson, & Dhingra (2016) surveyed students and their supervisors, finding that both groups agreed about the attributes of effective supervision, namely; both supervisors and students consider that a supervisor should have an interest in the student's research; the supervisor must provide timely and constructive feedback and help the student to manage time, and; students believe supervisors must encourage students to work independently and use opportunities to present their work.

Roach, Christensen, & Rieger (2019) in a study with a sample of 570 postgraduate students, revealed that students preferred supervisors who fostered caring/supportive relationships over those who focused more strictly on process. It is noteworthy that their conclusion was that research supervisors should focus on the interpersonal aspects of supervision and supporting the psychosocial needs of students, substantiating the findings of Ali et al. (2016)

We acknowledge that whilst the focus of our paper draws on Eurocentric perspectives of modules within higher education institutions (i.e. Universities) that have established research and dissertation modules, there are other private/government education/research institutions worldwide where research is also offered as part of professional training. As there is international readership for this paper, it is important for us to recognize that the approach to research in such private institutions, or professional bodies/associations may well be different. For instance, it may be less structured, or be smaller scale research training that may not be linked to an accreditation body. Furthermore, through our international work/dialogue and engagement in facilitating research teaching and learning with colleagues in some developing (low and middle-income) countries, we have noted a range of differences. For example, that some do not offer research training as part of their counselling, mental health courses but recommend that students do small research courses elsewhere.

In line with this, there has been some good critique worth considering particularly in relation to ethical, methodological and moral challenges that researchers and supervisors may face in doing cross-cultural research (Liamputtong, 2008). It is argued that there a range of considerations that can facilitate productivity in research. These include ethical issues such as ensuring authentic informed consent, being aware of power dynamics between researchers and participants in relation to cultural norms, challenges of language and meaning (Liamputtong, 2008). Furthermore Liamputtong, (2008) suggested that when working with populations in which the researcher is new, it is paramount to have reflexivity on their position of researcher-as-an-insider versus the researcher-as-an outsider.

Others, (Mugisha, Knizek, Kinyanda, and Hjelmeland, 2011) offered perspectives that support our critique of being focused on teaching on Eurocentric research methods modules. We support their assertion of the importance of having awareness of complexities of conducting research in different settings (which in the context of our paper we see as private or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's), or indeed in countries where governments fund institutions to support counsellor, psychotherapist, or psychologist research. They suggested that there may be challenges associated

with gaining access to study respondents which may be compounded by the prevailing laws in the country. Their example of this, was based on the practical and ethical challenges they faced in conducting qualitative research on suicide in a developing country. As their research was on attitudes toward suicide, they noted how their participants were reluctant to speak about their experience because they ‘did not trust’ the researcher because suicide was still a criminal offense in the legal statutes of the country, they were conducting their research (Mugisha, et al., (2011). In their paper, Mugisha, et al., (2011) concurred that *“there remains the need to understand the perspectives of research subjects in the developing world”* (p.15).

Thus, from this literature review and other work we have been engaged in locally and internationally we concluded there is paucity in research specifically on the counselling and psychotherapy postgraduate research experience, thus providing a rationale for a study, which we have in progress.

We are currently undertaking a study to examine the expectations and experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate counselling and psychotherapy students using focus groups as the method of collecting data. This data is currently being analysed and then prepared for full research publication. Early results combined with our own experiences have fostered the identification of themes which illustrated the students’ perceptions and subsequent experiences of engaging in research, see table 1.

Table 1. Student Counsellors or Psychotherapists engaged in research at University – Themes illustrating student responses in focus groups.

Students have an intrinsic motivation and hunger for academic study	Students have an expectation that any research will relate to their practice and real-life experience as a therapist
Research possesses an in-built mystical quality that initially generates significant apprehension or even fear for students	Dissemination of research findings needs to be planned for at the outset
Students want to gain esteem and professional recognition for research and see it as relevant to safeguarding their status	The impact of effective (or not) supervision cannot be under estimated

Analysis of the themes and focus group transcripts enabled the identification of a range of approaches to ensure a successful research experience. These are presented as tips for both research teachers and students to make research teaching and learning enjoyable and productive.

**Tips to make research enjoyable and productive.**

**Building on the research students’ intrinsic motivation and hunger for academic study:**

Tutors should; at the outset of supervision, find out why the student is on the course; provide a platform for students to tell you at the start what they want, their hope, fears, especially in a research methods module, and; provide a learning needs analysis framework/tool for your students.

Researchers should; share with others why you have a particular research interest; scope your intended topic thoroughly to make sure your work will add to the field and how, and; do a learning needs analysis of yourself.

**Students had an instrumental desire to safeguard their professional relevance, so:**

Tutors should; in validating awards, ensure reference to or accreditation by a professional body; determine how the research will add to the current field and evidence base, and; encourage graduates to join the alumni for benefits.

Researchers should; exercise great care when choosing a course to meet one's professional as well as academic needs, and: maintain engagement with research afterwards by joining the University alumni so you can still access library resources (journals) for free.

**Recognising the importance and effect of support and supervision:**

Tutors should; provide more reassurance than 'everything is fine', always offer timely, specific constructive observations and feedback in relation to acknowledging effective work as well as pushing the student further, and; offer a bounded, focused but caring and supportive relationship.

Researchers should; choose your supervisor carefully, look for skills, attitude, research competencies, not familiarity, and; where supervisor is allocated, be authentic, open and ask for specific constructive observations and feedback.

**In fostering learning and formulation of research as a language and process:**

Tutors should; adopt a developmental teaching process e.g. in teaching about focus groups, form focus groups in class as an experiential exercise, and; avoid overload of unfamiliar concepts and jargon.

Researchers should; apply new research language to your own breadth of practice and defined area of research, and; ask for reinforcement or revisit of topics not grasped.

**In meeting students' expectations and awareness of the relevance of research in their study and identification of a connected pedagogical and practical approach- linking to real life experiences:**

Tutors should; bring concepts to life using stories, anonymised client examples, your own personal therapeutic practice experiences.

Researchers should; choose an area of study you enjoy and have easy access to for acquiring primary or secondary data.

We have engaged with teaching research methods and continue supervising a range of research projects ourselves as well as engaged in dialogue with academic colleagues internationally about research challenges for supervisors and supervisees.

Before we conclude with the importance of aiming and planning for dissemination of findings, we will now note here a few more tips specifically for supervisors and students/therapists who consider conducting research abroad, or indeed in their local/private institution contexts where ethical, legal, moral and cultural positions present serious challenges.

### **Research in private institutions or abroad**

We suggest that both supervisors and supervisees gain understanding of the diverse values, cultural norms, and needs of the communities in which they intend to conduct the research.

Be sure that the communities you intend to research in are accessible and as supervisor/s and supervisee/s have a clear awareness of the power hierarchies in the form of political/community leaders (gatekeepers) at various levels relevant to that community (Prado & DeRoche, 2008).

Another important tip is that both supervisor and supervisees should have reflection time to deal with language competence challenges which require the researcher to take time to think through the culturally/context appropriate words both in the research design and also in dealing with his/her research subject without losing meaning or making respondents uncomfortable (Prado & DeRoche, 2008; Mugisha, et al., 2011).

To conclude this paper, we suggest that this tip of aiming and planning for dissemination is important for all who engage with research.

### **Aim and plan for dissemination of research findings:**

Tutors should; invite students producing high quality thesis to co-author article/paper, and; identify suitable conferences or forums for the student.

Researchers should; plan dissemination ideas from the outset, to ensure ethics and consent are clear so you will not need to revisit if publishing later, and; value your own work and investment of time by you and participants by using informal and formal communication. E.g. a research seminar to other students, a magazine opinion piece, give a talk to professionals and peers in your field.

By examining students' expectations and experiences and providing pointers for effective practice, the study we conducted and the tips in this paper, provides learning for anyone involved in teaching or supervising therapists in their research.

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